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## **WHY IS PAMPINEA 28? PYTHAGORAS MEETS AQUINAS IN THE ‘DECAMERON’**

VICTORIA KIRKHAM, University of Pennsylvania, Emerita<sup>1</sup>

Boccaccio tells us little about the *Decameron* frame narrators except their pseudonyms and ages. Eldest of the seven ladies, Pampinea is in her twenty-eighth year, while the youngest is 18. The three men, ready to serve female reliance on male guidance, are young, but none is under 25. Commentators, caught up by riddles of nomenclature, have all but ignored the numerals. Spelled out so carefully, 28th–18 and 25 tease our curiosity. Why should the Author express his ladies’ ages as a ten-year span, while for the gentlemen a single anchoring number suffices? If the seven women allude to the Virtues, as I have argued, and Pampinea chief among them personifies Prudence, what logic connects her to 28? And if the men point to the tricameral soul, in which Reason (Panfilo) controls the lower appetites of wrath (Filostrato) and lust (Dioneo), why does it matter that all three be over 25? Why is Pampinea, solicitous of orderly activity and happiness, the one to suggest a daily rotation of rulers in their rustic sojourn? Answers lie in medieval protocols for expressing age and its peak on the parabola of human life, lore that Boccaccio well knew. His own practices reflect fascination with Pythagorean numerology, immersion in Aristotle as transmitted by Aquinas, and a man trained in the law whose poetic North Star was Dante. The ages of the seven women and three men in the *brigata*, incidental details to modern readers, stand tall from a medieval outlook. They are sign posts in a philosophical system that perfects the *novella portante* (master novella) as an ideal allegorical realm, hovering in a hierarchical relationship over the tales it carries.

Keywords: Allegory, Psychomachy, Valle delle Donne, *Vita nuova*, *Convivio*, Aristotle, Justinian, Boccaccio, Numerology, Perfect numbers, Perfect age

Among the ten story tellers in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, only Pampinea is assigned an age.<sup>2</sup> To deduce it, we must patch together

<sup>1</sup> Kind thanks to the Italian graduate students at Penn for having invited me to speak at their seminar on the *Decameron* (postponed until after the pandemic) and publish in this journal. While writing during self-quarantine an essay many years in the thinking, I have benefitted from generous email exchanges with Judith C. Brown, Thomas Kuehn, Richard Lansing, and Michael Papio.

<sup>2</sup> For dating the first compositional phase of the *Decameron*, which Boccaccio kept revising until late in life, scholars have proposed various periods: 1348–1351 (or 1352?) at the earlier end, and at the widest window, 1348–before 1360. See for the

a pair of passages. The Author's eye first falls on his leading lady among the seven Florentines foregathered in Santa Maria Novella, none older than her twenty-eighth year or younger than eighteen, "niuna li venti e ottesimo anno passato avea né era minor di diciotto" (1, Intro. 49).<sup>3</sup> Soon after, this number-conscious narrator ascribes them screen names ("nomi alle qualità di ciascuna convenienti"), bringing her into focus as the eldest, "quella che di più età era, Pampinea chiameremo" (1, Intro. 51). Assuming leadership, she speaks with the voice of "natural reason" and eloquently advocates flight from the city to preserve their lives. Fortune smiles. Enter three young gentlemen, ready to serve female reliance on male guidance, all young, but none under 25 (1, Intro. 78). They, too, have pseudonyms. Why such mystery about identity? All are truly admirable—wise, noble, good looking, graced by fine manners and integrity ("onestà")—but aside from these fairy-tale features, the only precise facts Boccaccio releases about them are their ages. Commentators, caught up by riddles of nomenclature, have all but ignored the numerals.

Spelled out so carefully, 28th-18 and 25 tease our curiosity. Why should the Author express his ladies' ages as a ten-year span, while for the gentlemen a single anchoring number suffices? If the seven women allude to the Virtues, as I have argued, and Pampinea chief among them personifies Prudence, what logic connects her to 28? And if the men point to the tricameral soul, in which Reason (Panfilo) controls the lower appetites of wrath (Filostrato) and lust

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former Vittore Branca, vol. 2 of *Il capolavoro del Boccaccio e due diverse redazioni: Variazioni stilistiche e narrative* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2002), 5. Italian scholars have in recent years inclined toward the latter, broader time span; Marco Cursi, *Il Decameron: scritture, scriventi, lettori. Storia di un testo* (Rome: Viella, 2007), 21; *Boccaccio autore e copista*, eds. Teresa De Robertis, Carla Maria Monti, Marco Petoletti, Giuliano Tanturli, and Stefano Zamponi (Florence: Mandragora, 2013), 63; Amedeo Quondam, Introduction to Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, eds. Amedeo Quondam, Maurizio Fiorilla, and Giancarlo Alfano (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2013; 7th ed., 2017), 50-51; Francesco Bausi, *Leggere il Decameron* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), vol. 4 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, 10 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1964-1998). Unless otherwise indicated, all of Boccaccio's works are quoted from this series. Datings are from Victoria Kirkham, "Chronology of Boccaccio's Life and Works," in *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, eds. Victoria Kirkham, Michael Sherberg, and Janet Levarie Smarr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), xiii-xix. We must distinguish the historical Giovanni Boccaccio from "l'autore," a fictional character he created to narrate events supposedly witnessed starting in March, 1348. I designate the latter with a capital A, "Author."

(Dioneo), why does it matter that all three be over 25?<sup>4</sup> Why is Pampinea, solicitous of orderly activity and happiness, the one to suggest a daily rotation of rulers in their rustic sojourn? Answers lie in medieval protocols for expressing age and its peak on the parabola of human life, lore that Boccaccio well knew. His own practices reflect fascination with Pythagorean numerology, immersion in Aristotle as transmitted by Aquinas, and a man trained in the law whose poetic North Star was Dante. The ages of the seven women and three men in the *brigata*, incidental details to modern readers, stand tall from a medieval outlook, sign posts in a philosophical system that perfects the frame tale as an ideal allegorical realm.

Bare as the facts are about Pampinea, critics and translators cannot agree on them. Vittore Branca puts her age at 27, and so does G.H. McWilliam: “none was older than twenty-seven or younger than eighteen.”<sup>5</sup> Others, however, deduce from the ordinal “twenty-eighth” the cardinal integer 28. For them, she *is* 28. Earliest in English, the Elizabethan *Decameron* puts it this way: “She among them that was most entered into yeares, exceeded not eight and twenty; and the yongest was no lesse then [sic] eighteene.”<sup>6</sup> That set a precedent often followed.<sup>7</sup> A third school simply

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<sup>4</sup> Victoria Kirkham, “An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*,” *Italica* 42 (1985): 1–23; updated in Victoria Kirkham, *The Sign of Reason in Boccaccio’s Fiction* (Florence: Olschki, 1993), 131–71.

<sup>5</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 4, 993, n. 3: “Pampinea . . . ha 27 anni.” Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 58. To this family belongs as well the recent *Decameron*, trans. and intro. J. G. Nichols (New York: Everyman’s Library/Knopf, 2009), which presents the ladies as “all between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven.”

<sup>6</sup> *The Decameron. Containing one hundred pleasant nouels. Wittily discoursed. Between seuen honourable ladies and three noble gentlemen* (London: Isaac Jaggard, 1620).

<sup>7</sup> *Il Decamerone. One Hundred Novels written by John Boccacio, the First Refiner of the Italian Language. Now done into English, and accommodated to the Gust of the present Age* (London: printed for John Nicholson, et al., 1702): “the eldest was not above eight and twenty, and the youngest much about [=above?] eighteen”; *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio faithfully translated by J. M. Rigg*, 2 vols., (London: A. H. Bullen, 1903): “In age none exceeded twenty-eight, or fell short of eighteen years”; *The Decameron*, trans. Richard Aldington (New York: Covici, Friede, 1930; reprint 1949): “None of them was older than twenty-eight or younger than eighteen”; *The Decameron*, trans. Guido Waldman with notes by Jonathan Usher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): “the eldest was not past 28, the youngest not less than 18 years of age”; *The Decameron: Selected Tales*, ed. and trans. Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2017): “none of them was more than twenty-eight, the youngest being just eighteen.” Rigg (bowdlerized) and Aldington were often reprinted. The comprehensive Italian seven-hundredth-anniversary year collaboration concurs on this point. See the senior editor’s Introduction to *Decameron*, eds. Amedeo Quondam, et al., 23: “sono tutte

takes Boccaccio at his word. John Payne, active in a Victorian era that loved short stories, from risqué *novelle* to cosmopolitan folktales, published in 1886 the first unexpurgated English *Decameron*.<sup>8</sup> His rendering of the passage, retained with its archaic flavor in Charles S. Singleton's revision, is accurate to the letter: "Not one of them had passed her eight-and-twentieth year nor was less than eighteen years old."<sup>9</sup> Alone among all translators, Wayne Rebhorn has a senior story teller *not yet* in her twenty-eighth year, hence in her twenty-seventh, and therefore only 26: "none had reached her twenty-eighth year or was under eighteen."<sup>10</sup>

In sum, commentators on the *Decameron* and its translators sow confusion. Depending on which you read, Pampinea could be 26, 27, or 28—and possibly even 29. An unimportant matter, some might say. What difference does make exactly how old she is? The question can take us to their male companions, for whose ages Boccaccio is content to isolate only a lower limit, 25: "e ecco entrar nella chiesa tre giovani, non per ciò tanto che meno di venticinque anni fosse l'età di colui che più giovane era di loro" (1, Intro. 78). Here Rebhorn captures the paradox nicely: "lo and behold, who should come into the church but three young men, though none

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di età compresa tra i diciotto e i ventotto anni"; cf. Maurizio Fiorella's commentary, 178: "nessuna delle quali aveva passato i 28 anni."

<sup>8</sup> *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccacci (Il Boccaccio) now first completely done into English prose and verse by John Payne*, 3 vols. (London: Privately Printed for the Villon Society, 1886). For the cultural context of this watershed translation, see Victoria Kirkham, "The First English Translator of Straparola, Masuccio, and Ser Giovanni: William George Waters in his Victorian World," *ArNo Vit, Archivio Novellistico Italiano. Dal Novellino a Basile* 1, no. 1 (2016): 114–63; [http://www.arnovit.it/images/arnovit2016/arnovit16\\_kirkham.pdf](http://www.arnovit.it/images/arnovit2016/arnovit16_kirkham.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> *Decameron: The John Payne translation revised and annotated by Charles S. Singleton*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Singleton's student, Mark Musa, in collaboration with his colleague Peter Bondanella, are likewise literalists. See *Giovanni Boccaccio's The Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: New American Library, 1982): "none of [the ladies] had passed her twenty-eighth year, nor was any of them younger than eighteen." Their understanding reaches our century in *Decameron*, trans. Cormac Ó Cuilleánáin (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2004): "Not one of them had passed her twenty-eighth year or was less than eighteen years old."

<sup>10</sup> *The Decameron*, trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn (New York: Norton, 2013); *The Decameron*, trans. and ed. (abridged) Wayne Rebhorn, Norton Critical Editions (New York: Norton, 2016). With a publication date timed to honor Boccaccio's seven-hundredth birthday, Rebhorn's complete translation won serious critical notice in the United States. See, e.g., the review articles by Joan Acocella, "Renaissance Man: A New Translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*," *New Yorker*, November 11, 2013, 78–82; Stephen Greenblatt, "The Naughty Pleasures of Boccaccio," *New York Review of Books*, January 8, 2015, online.

so young as to be under twenty-five.”<sup>11</sup> With the closely placed noun “giovani” and adjective “giovane,” Boccaccio stresses their youth, an emphasis he then hastens to qualify. They are young, yes, but they all have attained a threshold that defines them as men, not boys. That boundary is not arbitrary.

In Roman Law (*ius commune*, common law), 25 was the age of majority. We read in Justinian’s *Digest*:

It is agreed that after this age, the strength of a full-grown man is reached. And, therefore, today, up to this age young men are governed by curators and under this age the administration of their own property should not be entrusted to them, even though they might be able to look after their affairs well.<sup>12</sup>

Minors need a “curator” or guardian to be in charge, as Dante argued in his *Convivio* (1304–1307), because the teen years are a turbulent period of growth and change that cloud our reason. The matter arises in his discussion of the four ages of man: “Adolescenzia,” “Gioventute,” “Senettute,” and “Senio.”

De la prima nullo dubita, ma ciascuno savio s’accorda ch’ella dura in fino al *venticinquesimo anno*; e però che infino a quel tempo l’anima nostra intende a lo crescere e a lo abbellire del corpo, onde molte e grandi transmutazioni sono ne la persona, non puote perfettamente la razionale parte discernere. Per che la Ragione vuole che dinanzi a quella etade l’uomo non possa certe cose fare senza curatore di perfetta etade.

No one has doubts about the first; indeed every wise man agrees that it lasts up to the *twenty-fifth year*. And since until that time our soul attends to physical growth and bodily enhancement, causing a person to undergo many great changes, the rational part cannot exercise

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<sup>11</sup> Ó Cuilleánáin renders the idea but breaks the flow: “three young men happened to come into the church. They were young, but not so young that the youngest of them was less than twenty-five years of age.” Waldman simplifies: “who should come into the church but three young men, of whom the youngest was aged not less than 25.” McWilliams takes much more freedom in his rearrangement of Boccaccio’s prose: “there came into the church three young men, in whom neither the horrors of the times nor the loss of friends or relatives nor concern for their own safety had dampened the flames of love, much less extinguished them completely. I have called them young, but none in fact was less than twenty-five years of age.”

<sup>12</sup> To my knowledge, this has not been pointed out in the commentary tradition on the *Decameron*. See *The Digest of Justinian*, ed. Theodor Mommsen with the aid of Paul Krueger, trans. Alan Watson, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 1: 125 (4.4.1), citing Ulpian: “post hoc tempus compleri uirilem uigorem constat. Et ideo hodie in hanc usque aetatem adulescentes curatorum auxilio regentur, nec ante rei suae administratio eis committi debet, quamvis bene rem suam gerentibus.” The *Corpus Juris Civilis* was compiled at the order of Justinian (ca. 482–565). It consisted of the *Digest*, the *Code*, the *Institutes*, and the *Novels*.

perfect discernment. Thus it stands to reason that before that age a man cannot do certain things without a curator who has reached the perfect age.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage, “the perfect age” means literally the “perfected” age, once Adolescence is complete. Behind Dante’s reasoning lies the section “On Curators” from Justinian’s *Institutes*:

Males, even after puberty, and females after reaching marriageable years, receive curators until completing their *twenty-fifth year*, because though past the age fixed by law as the time of puberty, they are not yet old enough to administer their own affairs.<sup>14</sup>

Boccaccio knew Dante’s *Convivio*, which he mentions in his life of the poet, but when and to what extent (beyond the *canzoni* that he transcribed), remain vexed questions.<sup>15</sup> He would himself in any event have had direct knowledge of Dante’s source in Justinian after his years at the University of Naples as a student of canon law.<sup>16</sup> That legal background, with the Code of Justinian as a pillar, was not as alien to him as autobiographical legend would

<sup>13</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio*, eds. Giovanni Busnelli and Giuseppe Vandelli, 2nd ed. rev. Antonio Enzo Quaglio, 2 vols. (Florence: Le Monnier, 1964), 2: 304–6 (4.24.1–7). The translation is mine, with some prompts from Dante, *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan, Stanford French and Italian Studies, no. 61 (Stanford: Alma Libri, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, italicized words in quotations are mine for emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> See *Conv.* 4.24.1 and n. p. 306, for Dante’s source in Justinian’s *Institutes* 1, tit. 23, “De curatoribus”: “Masculi quidem puberes et feminae viri potentes usque ad vicesimum quintum annum completum curatores accipiunt: qui licet puberes sint, adhuc tamen eius aetatis sunt, ut sua negotia tueri non possint.” Caesar Flavius Justinianus, *The Institutes of Justinian*, trans. John B. Moyle (1913), Online at Project Gutenberg, <http://legalhistorysources.com/Law508/Roman%20Law/JustinianInstitutes.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci, in *Tutte le opere* 3 (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), 1.199: “Compuose ancora uno commento in prosa in fiorentino volgare sopra tre delle sue canzoni distese, come che egli appaia lui avere avuto intendimento, quando il cominciò, di commentarle tutte, bene che poi, o per mutamento di proposito o per mancamento di tempo che avvenisse, più commentate non se ne truovano da lui; e questo intitolò Convivio, assai bella e laudevole operetta.” On the early fortunes of the *Convivio*, which did not become better known until the fifteenth century, see Beatrice Arduini, “Assigning the ‘pieces’ of Dante’s *Convivio*: The Compiler’s Notes in the Earliest Extant Copy,” *Textual Cultures* 3.2 (Autumn, 2008): 17–29; Beatrice Arduini, “Il ruolo di Boccaccio e di Marsilio Ficino nella tradizione del *Convivio* di Dante,” in *Boccaccio in America: 2010 International Conference University of Massachusetts Amherst*, eds. Elsa Filosa and Michael Papio (Ravenna: Longo, 2012), 95–103. Boccaccio is among the first to mention the *Convivio*. See Michele Barbi’s Introduction to the Busnelli-Vandelli *Convivio* edition, rev. Quaglio, lvii.

<sup>16</sup> Vittore Branca, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Profilo biografico* (Florence: Sansoni, 1977), 30–32, says he was a law student for five or six years.

have it. On the contrary, laws Roman, canon, and local flow into his creative literature.<sup>17</sup>

Over time, cities modified the standard set by Justinian, drafting their own statutes (*iura propria*). In Florence, local custom lowered the age of consent to 18. Boccaccio would have been well aware of this, which can explain why none of the female narrators is younger. His legal mind is at work when he populates the *Decameron* stories, a world of wealthy merchants concerned with accumulating money and keeping it in the family for heirs as they came of age, whether at an upper limit of 25 or a lower one of 18.<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, in the *Decameron* when property passes to boys under 18, economic disaster ensues. The thirteenth tale tells of Tedaldo de' Lamberti, or degli Agolanti, who had three sons named Lamberto, Tedaldo, and Agolante, “già belli e leggiadri giovani, quantunque il maggiore a *diciotto* anni non aggiungnesse.” When their rich father dies, they start spending lavishly, with only pleasure as guide, “senza alcuno altro governo che del loro piacere.” Youth is to blame for their impulsive behavior, “quello che nello appetito loro giovenile cadeva di voler fare” (2.3.7–9). Soon these three underage boys have squandered the whole

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<sup>17</sup> He cites a legal maxim, “alle cose impossibili niuno è tenuto” (“no one is required to do the impossible”), just before identifying himself in the first chapter of his *Filocolo* as a student of the popes’ “holy laws,” i.e., canon law: “ora nelle santi leggi dei tuoi successori spendo il tempo mio.” See *Filocolo*, ed. Antonio Enzo Quaglio (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), 1.1.28 and 1.1.30; 2.17.11. The antagonism between poets and the law is a literary topos. See, e.g., Boccaccio’s life of Petrarch (*De vita et moribus domini Francisci Petracchi*, ca. 1348–1350). In reality, a history from antiquity connects legal training with men of letters in Italy, among others Virgil, Ovid, Giacomo da Lentini, and Pier della Vigna. See Victoria Kirkham, *Fabulous Vernacular: Boccaccio’s Filocolo and the Art of Medieval Fiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), chap. 3, “The Reluctant Canonist,” 135–185. See also, Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), chap. 8, “The Law and its Transgressions,” 212–40. Mario Conetti, “Il colasso dell’ordine giuridico e il diritto naturale nel *Decameron*,” *Heliotropia* 12–13 (2015–2016), <http://www.heliotropia.org/12/conetti.pdf>, persuasively argues fundamental influences from Justinian’s body of laws on Boccaccio’s *novelle* and provides good bibliography. Fredi Chiappelli, “Discorso o progetto per uno studio sul *Decameron*,” in *Studi di Italianistica in onore di Giovanni Cecchetti*, eds. Paolo Cherchi and Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 1988), 105–11, proposed a plausible connection between Boccaccio’s rubrics with their condensed plot summaries and didactic topics of debate in legal training.

<sup>18</sup> Roman civil law, codified by Justinian in the sixth century in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, passed into European “common law” (*ius commune*), which operated together with local statutes (*iura propria*) that sometimes lowered the age of consent. Thomas Kuehn, *Family and Gender in Renaissance Italy 1300–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 7–8, 74, 82. Kuehn, whom I thank for information on legal history, comments that litigation could arise in cases involving men between the ages of 18 and 25 (personal communication, email of June 18, 2020).



inheritance. Another case in point—at least, potentially, because we don’t know the tale’s end—is Boccaccio’s anecdote about the hermit Filippo Balducci and his son, a boy already 18, but still on the naïve side: “Ora avvenne che, essendo già il garzone d’età di *diciotto* anni e Filippo vecchio . . .” (4, Intro., 17). Raised in the wilderness on vigils and prayers, no wonder when he goes with his father to Florence and sees a flock of “ducks,” he instantly wants one, and rather like a child asking for a pet or a toy, pleads with his parent to bring one of those colorful females back to their dreary cave.

In the stories about Tedaldo’s and Filippo’s sons, references to age 18 are not gratuitous. Boccaccio’s readers would have caught the telling detail because 18 marks a point of arrival in contemporary Florentine practice. What goes for the “realistic” *novelle*, however, falls short in the utopian world of the frame. Boccaccio bestows on his trio of male story tellers a mantle of heightened maturity, sanctioned by the venerable legal code descended from Emperor Justinian.<sup>19</sup> Young enough still to be fun-loving, by 25 and beyond they are farther into manhood, suitable as decorous escorts for the seven ladies because they have the necessary experience to exercise judiciously the rational power of discernment.

Like their male companions, Pampinea and her sisterhood have entered the years of discretion. Their ten-year span makes them markedly older than nubile females in contemporary society.<sup>20</sup> Going by figures extracted from Tuscan tax records of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, girls were marrying at 16–18; men at 23–30. For women, those numbers may be slightly inflated since they count not only daughters never married, but young widows back in their father’s household awaiting a second match.<sup>21</sup> Such is the situation of Boccaccio’s Ghismonda, whose overly affectionate father failed in his duty to remarry her, provoking fatal consequences (*Dec.* 4.1). A better outcome awaits Spina, the daughter of Currado Malaspina, slightly over sixteen: “Spina, rimasa vedova d’uno Niccolò da Grignano alla casa del padre tornò . . . assai bella e piacevole e giovane di poco più di *sedici* anni”

<sup>19</sup> Boccaccio refers to Justinian with high praise in the *Filocolo*, “l’inclito imperadore Giustiniano” (5.52.4), attributing him a son Bellisano, who has traveled from Athens to Rome with Ilario, the priest at San Giovanni in Laterano who solemnly catechizes and baptizes the protagonist Florio.

<sup>20</sup> None seems to be married except Lauretta, whose ballad (3, Concl.) hints at widowhood and a second marriage, unhappy in contrast to the first.

<sup>21</sup> David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 86–87, 203–10. The authors cite the diarist Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, whose *Ricordi* date from 1393–1411. He advised, “Take her as a child if you wish to be happy with her.”

(*Dec.* 2.6.35). Already a widow at sixteenish, she is still highly marriageable.

The canonical female age for a first marriage in the *Decameron* is 15.<sup>22</sup> In Boccaccio's thirty-third tale, which doubles the three-brothers of his thirteenth, a trio of youths love three sisters, two of whom are twins aged 15: "nate a un corpo, erano *d'età di quindici anni* . . . né altro s'attendeva per li loro parenti a maritarle che la tornata di N'Arnald" (4.3.9). Again in the fifth tale of Day 5, the "Marriage Day" in the *Decameron*, a maiden of 15 becomes an object of desire for Giannole and Minghino, "Né era alcun di loro, essendo ella *d'età di quindici anni*, che volentier non l'avesse per moglie presa se da' suoi parenti fosse stato sofferto" (5.5.8). Amorous Pinuccio finds overnight lodging in a crowded country bedroom with Niccolosa, "una giovinetta bella e leggiadra, *d'età di quindici o di sedici anni*, che ancora marito non avea" (9.6.5). On Day 10, studded with deeds of magnanimity, old King Charles I of Anjou overcomes his sudden lust for Messer Neri degli Uberti's beautiful twin daughters, Ginevra and Isotta, "due giovinette *d'età forse di quindici anni*," then richly dowers them in honorable marriages (10.6.11). Even the one *novella* set in antiquity to exemplify superlative friendship recognizes anachronistically the norm of Boccaccio's day: Gisippo's friends and family urge him to take a wife, "e trovarongli una giovane di maravigliosa bellezza e di nobilissimi parenti discesa e cittadina d'Atene, il cui nome era Sofronia, *d'età forse di quindici anni*" (10.8.10).<sup>23</sup>

These passages invariably turn on a cardinal number (*d'età di xx anni*), a standard formula for Boccaccio across his vernacular corpus. His *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia* (1373–1374) incorporate many short *vite* that are occasions for noting a person's age at death. Noah passed away after living 950 years in the grace of God, "essendo vivuto novecentocinquanta anni nella grazia di Dio, passò di questa vita" (4. 1. 55); Horace died in Rome at 57, "Morì in Roma d'età di cinquantasette anni" (4.1.115); when the singular man Aristotle had reached 63, his life ended, "pervenuto questo singulare uomo all'età di sessantatrè anni, finì la vita sua" (4.1.254). Boccaccio records other memorable events the same way. Socrates was imprisoned at 99, "essendo già d'età di

<sup>22</sup> See Branca's commentary on the *Decameron*, 1088, n. 8; 1222, n. 15; 1285, n. 7.

<sup>23</sup> See Victoria Kirkham, "The Classic Bond of Friendship in Boccaccio's Tito and Gisippo (*Decameron* X,8)," in *The Classics in the Middle Ages. Papers of the Twentieth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, eds. Aldo S. Bernardo and Saul Levin (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 69, 1990), 223–35.

novantanove anni, fu fatto mettere in pregione” (4.1.270); Costanza, a nun kidnapped from her cloister, became the mother of Frederick II at the astonishingly advanced age of 56, “già d’età di cinquantasei anni” (10.94).<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes, however, instead of a cardinal number, he chooses the ordinal option. Jesus disputed with the doctors in the Temple in his twelfth year, “essendo egli già nel duodecimo anno nel tempio di Dio co’ dottori della giudaica legge disputò.” This fact nestles in an early romance, *Filocolo* (1334–1336), part of Frate Ilaro’s Lateran catechism preparatory to the protagonist’s conversion and baptism.<sup>25</sup> Boccaccio’s source on the Disputation is the Gospel of Luke 2:42–46, which states it a bit differently. According to the Bible, the boy was 12, not in his twelfth year: “And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem . . . they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers.”<sup>26</sup> In our modern thinking “twelfth year” would mean 11 years old, but Boccaccio certainly didn’t intend to imply 11, since that quantity is a symbol of sin, while 12 as sum of the Apostles carries connotations of Christ.<sup>27</sup> He keeps the Scriptural number but switches to an alternative mode. For Messer Giovanni, we begin to suspect, an ordinal number can be the same as its cardinal equivalent.

Finally, there are composite examples, including the one we began with, which introduces a group of seven ladies between their twenty-eighth year of life and 18. In this combination art puts a spin on facts: Boccaccio counts down backward, reversing the normal pattern of speech—but stressing 28. His reckoning rings

<sup>24</sup> This contradicts the age he gives in *De mulieribus claris*, ed. Vittorio Zaccaria, in *Tutte le opere*, 10 (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), 104.7: “non absque audientium admiratione, ut quinquagesimum et quintum etatis sue annum agens, annosa conciperet” (“to the great amazement of those who knew, Costanza became pregnant at fifty-five years and conceived in her old age”). Boccaccio regularly avoids registering age in *De mulieribus claris* and *De casibus virorum illustrium*, reverting to vague, generic usage. Recall, for example, Eve: “fessa laboribus moritura devenit in senium” [“broken by travails, she descended into old age and soon died”] (*De casibus* 1.8). The detail on Costanza is exceptional, suggesting that to report such information as individual age is not part of his moralizing intent, which emphasizes rather our universal status as human beings. Dante had remembered this same Costanza in the heaven of the moon, alongside Piccarda Donati (*Par.* 2.109–20).

<sup>25</sup> *Filocolo*, ed. Antonio Enzo Quaglio, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), 5.54.23.

<sup>26</sup> *New Catholic Edition of the Holy Bible translated from the Latin Vulgate*, Douay Version (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1949–50).

<sup>27</sup> “Et cum factus esset annorum duodecim . . . remansit puer Iesus in Ierusalem . . . in templo sedentem in medio doctores” (Vulgate). On the numbers 11 vs. 12, see Victoria Kirkham, “Eleven is for Evil: Measured Trespass in Dante’s *Commedia*,” *Allegorica* 10 (1989): 27–50. Cf. Rabanus Maurus, “De numero,” in *De universo* 118.3, on the association of 12 with the Apostles.

rhetorically with its pleasing repetition and variation. In another instance of mixed formulas, Boccaccio reports that Beatrice passed away in her twenty-fourth year after falling in love at 8 with Dante, who was 9.

[Beatrice] nel ventiquatresimo anno della sua età passò di questa vita, negli anni di Cristo **ĪCCLXXXX**. Fu questa donna maravigliosamente amata dall'autore; né cominciò questo amore nella loro provetta età, ma nella loro fanciulleza, per ciò che, essendo ella d'età d'otto anni e l'autore di nove, sì come egli medesimo testimonia nel principio della sua *Vita Nuova*, prima piacque agli occhi suoi.

[In the twenty-fourth year of her age, she passed away from this life, in the year of our Lord 1290. The extraordinary love that the author bore for her began not in early maturity but in their childhood, because when she was eight years old and the author nine, as he himself attests at the beginning of his *New Life*, she first pleased his eyes] (*Esposiz.* 2.1. 84).<sup>28</sup>

He makes a point of noting that they are not old enough to be experienced or “proven,” not “nella loro provetta età.” The cardinal age he assigns Dante contradicts what he had earlier recorded in the *Trattatello in laude di Dante* (1351–ca.1355). Giving reign there to his fantasy, the Certaldan draws on the *Vita Nuova* to embellish Dante’s first encounter with Beatrice, a festive party hosted by Folco Portinari. The boy, “whose ninth year was not yet finished,” went with his father: “sì come i fanciulli piccoli . . . sogliono li padri seguire, Dante, il cui nono anno non era ancora finito, seguito avea.”<sup>29</sup> The discrepancy points again to the possibility that in Boccaccio’s mind, if twelfth can be the same as 12, a similar numerical equivalence exists between 9 and ninth year.

As life spans went in the Middle Ages, the most famous and ambiguous was that of Christ. 33 at the Crucifixion, he was in his thirty-fourth year. In more exact terms, he lived thirty-three years plus the months between the Nativity and Easter, one-third of the year when he would have turned 34. Fractions being problematic to medieval arithmetic, a solution was to count those extra months as a full year. So it is possible to think of him as either 33 or 34 at death. The Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis* (11th c.), a sophisticated

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<sup>28</sup> Translation mine, with suggestions from *Expositions on Dante’s Comedy*, trans. Michael Papio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, 1.13. One of Dante’s most learned Anglo-Saxon commentators quotes the full episode of the holiday feast at the home of Beatrice’s father from Boccaccio’s “Life of Dante”: “as little boys are wont to follow their fathers, especially to festive places, Dante, whose ninth year was not yet finished, followed him.” See *The New Life of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Charles Eliot Norton (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 101 (full text available at HathiTrust).

numerical composition, uses both 33 and 34 to structure the poem and pace the saint's life as an *imitatio Christi*.<sup>30</sup> Most theologians, scholars, and poets gave the Nazarene's age at the end simply as 33. Sanctified by Christ's years on earth, that number regulated the length of Augustine's *Contra Faustum manichaeum* (33 books), Cassiodorus's *Institutiones* (33 chapters), Godfrey of Viterbo's *Pantheon* (33 *particulae*).<sup>31</sup>

Dante, too, chose Trinitarian units of 33 cantos per canticle in the *Commedia*, allowing a thirty-fourth in *Inferno* for the prologue scene, so like the *Vie de Saint Alexis*, he has it both ways. In the *Convivio*, however, he thinks of Aristotle when calculating Christ's final age. Envisioning our life span as an arc, which varies from person to person, he acknowledges how hard it is to locate the high point, but when nature operates most perfectly, that apex is the thirty-fifth year:

lo maestro de la nostra vita Aristotile s'accorse di questo arco . . . . Là dove sia lo punto sommo di questo arco . . . è forte da sapere; ma ne li più io credo tra il trentesimo e quarantesimo anno, e io credo che ne li perfettamenteaturati esso ne sia nel *trentacinquesimo* anno. E movemi questa ragione: che ottimamente naturato fue lo nostro salvatore Cristo, lo quale volle morire nel *trentaquattresimo* anno de la sua etade.

Since it would not have been fitting for the Savior to live in a declining state, he died at *almost* the peak age of 35, in his thirty-fourth year.

For Boccaccio, both 33 and 35 are archetypes. In his commentary on the Harrowing of Hell (*Inf.* 4.55), he declares that Adam, first to be liberated by the Savior, was created in Eden at the "perfect age," that of Christ at his death, thirty-three years ("fu creato in età perfetta, la quale tengono esser quella nella quale Cristo morì, cioè trentatrè anni"). Likewise, God pulled Eve as helpmate from his rib when she was "di perfetta età" (*Esposiz.* 4.1.41–42.). His chronological standard of perfection stood at 35,

<sup>30</sup> Anna Granville Hatcher, "The Old French Poem St. Alexis: A Mathematical Demonstration," *Traditio* 8 (1952): 111–58; Eleanor Webster Bulatkin, "The Arithmetic Structure of the Old-French *Vie de Saint Alexis*," *PMLA* 74.5 (Dec., 1959): 495–502. For a modern edition, see Carl J. Odenkirchen, *The Life of St. Alexius In the Old French Version of the Hildesheim Manuscript: The Original Text Reviewed, with Comparative Greek and Latin Versions, All Accompanied by English Translations; and an Introductory Study, a Bibliography, and Appendices* (Brookline, MA and Leyden: Classical Folio Editions, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> For these and other examples, see Ernst Robert Curtius, "Numerical Composition," in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 501–9.

however, when he commented on the *Commedia* incipit. Explaining “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” with reference to Psalm 90:10 (Douay 89:10: “The sum of our years is seventy”), he says that Dante has reached the halfway point of our seventy years.<sup>32</sup> Hence midway along his life path the pilgrim was 35 (“egli era di età di trentacinque anni”), an age Boccaccio as glossator goes on to call “perfect” because that is when the arc of our time on earth peaks. Before, our faculties are still in formation; after, we go into decline.<sup>33</sup> At a moral level, it follows, Dante has reached the vertex of physical and spiritual maturity (*Esposiz.* 1.2.67–68).<sup>34</sup> Dante had pinned it down in the *Convivio*, discoursing on the four ages of man: “l colmo del nostro arco è ne li trentacinque” (*Conv.* 4.24.3). What becomes “at age 35” in his commentary on the *Commedia* had been “thirty-fifth year” in the life of Dante, where Boccaccio assigns that age to both poet and pilgrim, telescoping time (*Tratt.* 1.177). Did his memory slip between the *Trattatello* and

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<sup>32</sup> Vulgate, Psalm 89:10: “dies annorum nostrorum septuaginta anni.”

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Esposiz.* 15.26–27. Asked how he came to be passing through Hell by Ser Brunetto, Dante recapitulates his journey and Boccaccio comments: “Mostrato è stato nel primo canto di questo libro gli anni degli uomini stendersi infino al settantesimo, e che infino al trentesimo quinto continuamente o alla statura dell’uomo o alle forze corporali s’aggiunge, e perciò in quello tempo si dice essere l’età dell’uomo ‘piena’”; *Boccaccio’s Expositions*, trans. Papio, 15.26–27: “It was shown in the first canto of this book that the years of men extend until the seventieth and that, until the thirty-fifth, there is an increase either in a man’s stature or in his physical strength. Therefore, at that point, it may be said that the age of a man is ‘full’.” Cf. Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 114–15 (1.6.72–73): “At the thirty-fifth year the man attains the full vigor of his physical powers; no one is able to increase his strength later”; Macrobius, *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis*, in *Macrobius*, ed. Jacob Willis, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), 2: 32 (1.6.72–73): “quinta [annorum hebdomas] omne virium, quantae inesse uni cuique possunt, complet augmentum, nulloque modo iam potest quisquam se fortior fieri.”

<sup>34</sup> To explain why the Suicides in Hell have turned into plants, Boccaccio describes the soul’s three principal powers (“potenzie principali”), the vegetative, sensitive, and rational. God does not infuse the last in us through his grace until our perfect age (“nella perfetta età”), when all the organs through which it operates are fully grown (*Esposiz.* 13.2.5). Discussing those damned for not believing in the immortality of the soul, he tells how Frederick II was born to the ex-nun Costanza, forced into marriage at 56. After her death, the child Frederick was given into care of the Church, granted at “the perfect age” the kingdom of Sicily, and finally elected Holy Roman Emperor (*Esposiz.* 10.94–95). See the notes on these passages by Giorgio Padoan in his edition of the *Esposizioni*, who also cites Boccaccio’s account of Psyche, daughter of Apollo and Entelecheia in the *Genealogia deorum gentilium*. The mythographer allegorizes Entelecheia as mother of the rational soul, which begins to function at the perfect age: “etate vero perfecta agere incipimus ratione” (*Gen. deor.* 5.22.12).

*Esposizioni*, or does he simply blur the distinction between cardinal 34 and ordinal 35, one being as good as the other?<sup>35</sup>

Dante, when much younger, registers his own age as he copies selections from his book of memory at the beginning of the *Vita Nuova*:

Nove fiate già apresso lo mio nascimento era tornato lo cielo della luce  
quasi a uno medesimo puncto quanto alla sua propria giratione, quando  
alli miei occhi apparve prima la gloriosa donna della mia mente.

Nine times already since my birth had the heaven of light returned to  
the selfsame point *almost*, as concerns its own revolution, when first  
the glorious Lady of my mind was made manifest to mine eyes.<sup>36</sup>

His astrological allusion to the “heaven of light” (the sun) in its own turning prompts some commentators to cite for comparison a later sonnet of his to Cino da Pistoia. It opens with a clear allusion back to the poet’s first sighting of Beatrice:

Io sono stato con Amore insieme  
da la circolazion del sol mia nona,  
e so com’egli affrena e come sprona,  
e come sotto lui si ride e geme.

I have been together with Love since my ninth revolution of the sun,  
and I know how he curbs and spurs, and how under his sway one  
laughs and groans.<sup>37</sup>

He has been a lover (“with Love”) since his ninth year. In both cases, the *Vita nuova* and the sonnet, an ordinal numeral marks the

<sup>35</sup> Actually, Dante was in his thirty-fifth year, not 35. See Richard Lansing, “Numerology,” in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (2000; reprint London: Routledge, 2010), 653–57.

<sup>36</sup> *Vita nuova*, 5; *The New Life of Dante Alighieri Translated and Pictured by Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, intro. FitzRoy Carrington (New York: R.H. Russell, 1901), 31. The 1840 uncovering of what was believed to be Dante’s most authentic portrait, in the Bargello, inspired Rossetti, son of an Italian political émigré and an ardent Italophile, to translate the *Vita Nuova* (1846), which he later illustrated. See Carrington’s introduction, 8–9.

<sup>37</sup> For example, *La vita nuova*, ed. Tommaso Casini, rev. Cesare Segre (Florence: Sansoni, 1962), 4–5, annotating “Nove fiate già” cites the parallel passage from Dante’s sonnet exchange with Cino, who had inquired if a fading love should yield to a new attachment. See *Dante’s Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 1: 198–200; 2: 321–25. Cf. *Dante’s Rime*, trans. Patrick S. Diehl, 219: “I have stood now in the brightness of Love’s beams / Since I beheld my ninth year on its wane / And know how he will handle spur and rein / And how both tears and laughter are his themes.” I thank Richard Lansing for calling to my attention this sonnet in our email dialogue.

time, established with reference to the sun's revolutions. The focus, of course, in Dante's account of his "new life" is on "nove," first word of the story proper and a symbol that returns repeatedly in the poet's tribute to his beloved Beatrice, herself a 9 because she is a miracle like her number, the product of the miraculous Trinity multiplied by itself. Dante's careful wording makes it clear that he is not 9, but *almost* 9. That "almost" means he is really 8, but in his ninth year.

Now whereas even some of Boccaccio's most authoritative interpreters shift Pampinea's "twenty-eighth year" to 27, none of Dante's readers proposes lowering his age to 8. On the contrary, quite a few have gone so far as to say Dante *is* 9 (but they don't say that puts him in his tenth year).<sup>38</sup> The operative number for his age in this context is neither 8 nor 10. It is clearly 9. The same holds for his beatific lady, who appeared to him *almost* at the beginning of her ninth year, "*quasi dal principio del suo anno nono apparve a me*" (*Vita Nuova* 1.2).<sup>39</sup> If ninth year means 9 for Dante, twenty-eighth means 28 for Boccaccio.

★ ★ ★

Dante's *Vita Nuova*, vivid in Boccaccio's late-life *Esposizioni* and his mid-career *Trattatello*, had already found a cherished memory space during his Neapolitan years. As early as *Caccia di Diana* (1333–1334), the neophyte pays it tribute in his portrayal of a Mystery Lady who, thirty-third among sixty huntresses, brings

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<sup>38</sup> One branch of the commentary tradition overlooks the "almost." See, for example, Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, ed. Lodovico Magugliani (Milano: Rizzoli, 1952), 7: "*Nove fiate . . . era tornato*, il cielo del sole si trovava per la nona volta dopo la nascita di Dante, nel medesimo punto della propria orbita. Erano trascorsi nove anni; era il 1° maggio 1274"; *La vita nuova*, eds. Casini and Segre, 4: "*Nove fiate*, dice Dante che gli apparve per la prima volta Beatrice quando egli era in età di nove anni: ora poiché l'anno della nascita di lui, secondo i suoi biografi, fu il 1265, questo incontro sarebbe da riferire al 1274"; *La vita nuova*, ed. Gustavo Adolfo Ceriello (Milan: Carlo Signorelli, 1968), 16: "*lo cielo de la luce*: il sole. Intendi: eran passati nove anni"; *Vita nuova. Con una guida alla lettura di Edoardo Sanguineti* (Milan: Garzanti, 1977), notes by Alfonso Berardinelli, 1: "Erano trascorsi nove anni dalla nascita di Dante"; *Vita nuova*, ed. and trans. Dino Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 186 (under "nine" in the Topical Index): "2:1 (Nine times since my birth), 3:1 (precisely nine years were completed)."

<sup>39</sup> Other scholars accurately put Dante almost in his ninth year: Dante Alighieri, *The New Life of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Norton, 101: Dante was "not yet in his ninth year"; Lansing, "Numerology," 654: "The poet-lover first sees her when both are in their ninth year"; *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 104: "Dante indicates that he was almost nine years old when he first saw Beatrice (traditionally, in May 1274)"; *Il libro della Vita nuova*, ed. Domenico De Robertis (Florence: Sansoni, 197), 28: *Nove fiate* is glossed as 9 "come per cifra ed emblema di tutta la storia."



“salute.”<sup>40</sup> His *Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia*, begun in Naples and completed in Florence (1339–1341), weaves words and images from Dante’s youthful booklet (“libello”) into an epic tapestry of 9,904 verses cast in *ottava rima*. Boccaccio’s heroine Emilia, like Decameronian Sofronia, is an ancient-world dweller. Duke Theseus takes her captive from Thebes to Athens, where the knights Arcita and Palemone become rivals for her love. To determine the winner, Theseus organizes a great tournament. Arcita, a votary of Mars, wins the battle but dies from his wounds, giving victory to Palemone, protégé of Venus. Boccaccio’s epic, the first in Italy’s vernacular, ends with the marriage of Emilia and Palemone. No accident that the poet proudly spotlights his source, the beginning of Dante’s love, at his grand finale, that wedding promised by the *Teseida* title. The heroine’s age at the time of these nuptials could not be more perfect:

Né era ancor, dopo ’l suo nascimento,  
tre volte cinque Appollo ritornato  
nel loco donde allor fê partimento  
.....  
Quando costei apparve primamente  
Ornata . . . .

Nor after her birth had Apollo yet returned three times five to the place whence he had then made his departure . . . when she first appeared adorned . . . . (*Tes.* 12.64.1–3; 12.65.1–2).<sup>41</sup>

Both *Vita Nuova* and *Teseida* rely on an astrological circumlocution for the revolving sun and report a time that falls just short: “Nove fiate . . . era tornato lo cielo della luce *quasi* a uno medesimo puncto;” “*Né era ancor* . . . tre volte cinque Appollo ritornato.” In the *Teseida*, to make sure we follow his roundabout arithmetic, the “Author” (Boccaccio himself masked as glossator) appends three

<sup>40</sup> *Caccia di Diana, Diana’s Hunt: Boccaccio’s First Fiction*, eds. Anthony K. Cassell and Victoria Kirkham (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 7–8, 12–13, 23–24, 67. The *Caccia* enshrines her salvific quality in its last word (18.58). She is the lady, the narrator concludes, “da cui ancora spero aver salute” (“from whom I yet hope to have salvation”). For other borrowings from Dante, beginning with *terza rima* see the Cassell-Kirkham commentary.

<sup>41</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia*, ed. Alberto Limentani, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 2 (Milan: Mondadori, 1964). The story is familiar to English readers from Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale.” Boccaccio glosses “fê partimento” as “nacque.” He had used the word “partimento” to mean “departure” in *Filocolo* 1.1.17: “[il giorno] nel quale il glorioso partimento del figliuolo di Giove dagli spogliati regni di Plutone si celebrava,” that is, that day of Christ’s resurrection from Hell, Holy Saturday. Cited by *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, online at [http://vocabolario.sns.it/html/s\\_index2.html](http://vocabolario.sns.it/html/s_index2.html).

notes. First, he kindly explains “tre volte cinque” as “quindici,” writing out the numbers. Then he equates Apollo with “il sole”—hardly an obscure allusion. And finally, lest we may have missed the sense, he restates it in Roman numerals: “aveva xv anni.” Commentary attached to these verses, as some critics might say, is overdetermined. Or, in my formulation, it constitutes an example not of narrative economy, but narrative luxury.<sup>42</sup> Boccaccio overstates his case.

Why such redundancy at this textual convergence? And if the sun has “*not yet returned* . . . fifteen times” to its point of departure, wouldn’t that mean the bride is fourteen? Why then is he so insistent about 15, and why express that number as the product of its factors? Two things are certain: the number 15, which will return to the *Decameron* as canonical for marriageable girls, first assumes that identity in the *Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia*. Second, Boccaccio is indeed quite comfortable equating cardinal and ordinal ages since the poet, both as Author and as his glossator, mixes the two.<sup>43</sup>

At this point a source deeper in the past than Dante tugs us to attention, the *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* by the late classical encyclopedist Macrobius (fl. ca. 400), who became a medieval curriculum author.<sup>44</sup> Just one sentence before launching into his explanation of Scipio’s age at the culmination of his life, Macrobius announces that he will proceed selectively: “Now we must discuss the words of *Scipio’s Dream*, not all of them, but those that seem worth investigating.”<sup>45</sup> The sleeping Scipio learns from his grandfather’s ghost that he is destined to save the Roman state at age 56, an oneiric prophecy that launches the commentator into a comprehensive digression on Pythagorean numerology:

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<sup>42</sup> Victoria Kirkham, “Dante’s Polysynchrony: A Perfectly Timed Entry into Eden,” *Filologia e Critica* 20, nos. 2–3 (1995): 329–52.

<sup>43</sup> He was not alone. See. E. H. Wilkins, “The Date of the Birth of Boccaccio,” *Romanic Review* 1 (1910), 367–73: “ordinal numerals were sometimes employed, in expressions of age, with the value of the corresponding cardinals” (369). For Petrarch what counts is the ordinal age. He writes to Boccaccio when he is turning 62, concerned about entering his sixty-third year; as the product of 7 x 9 it was a climacteric for men considered astrologically dangerous. See Paolo Cherchi, “Petrarca a 63 anni: una sfida alle stelle; ma . . .,” *Studi e Problemi di Critica Testuale* 39 (1989): 133–46.

<sup>44</sup> Boccaccio frequently cites him, and it is likely he owned the *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis* as well as the *Saturnalia*. See Antonia Mazza, “L’inventario della ‘parva libreria’ di Santo Spirito e la biblioteca di Boccaccio,” *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 9 (1966): 1–71, no. 2.1.

<sup>45</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, 94 (1.5.1); Idem, *Commentarii*, 2: 14 (1.4.5): “nunc iam discutienda nobis sunt ipsius somnii verba, non omnia sed ut quaeque videbuntur digna quaesitu.”

First of all, the passage about numbers presents itself for consideration, in which Scipio's grandfather says: *When your age has completed seven times eight recurring circuits of the sun, and the product of these two numbers, each of which is considered full for a different reason, has rounded out your destiny, the whole state will take refuge in you and your name.*<sup>46</sup>

Dante and Boccaccio, like Macrobius, record age by the sun's revolutions. Dante follows Macrobius in alerting his little book's readers to an account that will abbreviate the original, "trovo scritte le parole, le quali è mio intendimento d'assemblare in questo libello, e, se non tutte, almeno la loro sentenza" (VN 1). What Boccaccio borrows most obviously is the person's age expressed as a product of its factors: 7 x 8 for Scipio, 3 x 5 for Emilia. Her age, emphasized in the notes, is more than mere number play. Appropriating a formula from Macrobius, he invests it with meaning that serves the symbolism of marriage.

Boccaccio's hybrid epic, going Virgil one better by enhancing martial song with Venus and matrimony, stages allegorically a battle between the higher and lower powers of the soul: Reason (Teseo) triumphs over the sensitive appetites, personified by Arcita (irascibility) and Palemone (concupiscence).<sup>47</sup> To support this double-decker structure, rooted philosophically in Aristotle and Aquinas, the poet creates a numerical composition on a monumental scale. Winking from his glosses on Emilia's age, he points us to a number and its permutations in the epic: in literal form (15), separated into aliquot parts (3, 5), and in their multiples (30, 50, 500). Fifteen sonnets frame the epic, articulated classically into twelve books and ending with a wedding celebrated for fifteen days.<sup>48</sup> Dominant among pagan deities present, *de rigueur* for a heroic poem, are Venus and Mars, gods respectively of the third and the

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 95 (1.5.1–2); Macrobius, *Commentarii*, 2: 14 (1.5.1–2): "ac primis nobis tractandam se ingerit pars illa de numeris in qua si ait: *nam cum aetas tua septenos octies solis anfractus reditusque converterit, duoque hi numeri, quorum uterque plenus, alter altera de causa habetur, circuitu naturali summan tibi fatalem confecerint, in te unum atque in tuum nomen se tota convertet civitas.*" Italics indicate quotes from Cicero's *De re publica*, the text that Macrobius partially preserved by writing his commentary on it.

<sup>47</sup> For a systematic exploration of the epic's numerology and marriage symbolism, see Victoria Kirkham, "'Chiuso parlare' in Boccaccio's *Teseida*," in *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio. Studies in the Italian Trecento in Honor of Charles S. Singleton*, eds. Aldo S. Bernardo and Anthony L. Pellegrini (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts, 1983), 305–51; updated in Kirkham, *The Sign of Reason*, 17–53. On the numerology of marriage in the *Teseida*, see Kirkham, *The Sign of Reason*, 42–46.

<sup>48</sup> *Teseida* 12.80.7–8: "ma dopo il dì quindecimo si pose / fine alle feste liete e graziose" [but after the fifteenth day they put an end to the joyful and gracious celebrations].

fifth heavens in the Aristotelian–Ptolemaic universe.<sup>49</sup> Their planetary numbers, 3 and 5, influence placement of content: Venus dominates Book 3, Mars rules Book 5. Boccaccio describes their mythic dwellings at the epic’s twin centers, situated in the seventh book and hooks for the longest and most heavily allegorical glosses in the poem: 7.30 and 7.50. Each god, Boccaccio explains, can be good (love legitimated by marriage, righteous anger) or bad (illicit sex, destructive rage).<sup>50</sup> Book 7 inverts the astrological equations in a chiasmus that matches each with the opposite’s number, as if to “marry” them: the glosses on 7.30 describe the house of Mars and on 7.50, the realm of Venus. That cross-over makes for a fitting union since Renaissance mythography understood Mars and Venus as symbolic of marriage. Once safely under reason’s control, Palemon can wed Emilia in a ceremony that resolves all conflict. At the end, the “good” Venus wins, she who promotes harmony, fertility, and matrimony.

The pentad, which accompanies Mars as god of the fifth heaven, his votary Arcita (in disguise “Penteo,” “Fively”), and crosses over to “marry” Venus at Book 7.30, does double duty. While 5 points to Mars and strife in one sense—hence a tournament amphitheater of “five hundred tiers” (*Tes.* 7.110.2)—it is also a Pythagorean marriage number. The rationale for that starts with knowing the proper way to count in this ancient system, conveyed into the Middle Ages by authors like Macrobius and his contemporary Martianus Capella, western heirs to the Greek philosophy descended from Pythagoras (fl. 6th c. B.C.E.). The monad (1) stands apart and alone. As Macrobius wrote in his *Commentary*, “one is called *monas*, that is Unity, and is both male and female, odd and even, itself not a number, but the source and origin of numbers.”<sup>51</sup> Martianus, whose *Marriage of Philology and Mercury*

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<sup>49</sup> There is one sonnet to summarize each book’s contents; a general proemial sonnet, and two that form an epilogue, in which the Author sends his book to Fiammetta, asking her to name it, and she replies with the title that pleases her. Diana, patron of Emilia, also figures prominently in the *Teseida*. Her number is 7: she is the seventh planet counting from Saturn down to earth. The Pythagoreans called 7 “virgin.” Macrobius, *Commentary*, 102 (1.6.11): “[7] is regarded as a virgin because when doubled, it produces no number under ten that is equal to the sum of its parts”; *Commentarii*, 2: 20 (1.6.11): “nam virgo creditur, quia nullum ex se parit numerum duplicatus qui intra denarium coartetur.”

<sup>50</sup> *Teseida* 7.30: “è da sapere che in ciascuno uomo sono due principali appetiti, de’ quali l’uno si chiama appetito concupiscibile, . . . l’altro si chiama appetito irascibile” [we must know that in every man there are two principal appetites, of which one is called the concupiscible appetite, . . . and the other is called irascible appetite].

<sup>51</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, 100 (1.6.7); Macrobius, *Commentarii*, 2:19 (1.6.7): “unum autem quod ‘monas’ id est unitas dicitur et mas idem et femina est, par idem atque impar, ipse non numerus sed fons et origo numerorum.”

brings to an allegorical wedding the seven Liberal Arts as bridesmaids so each can teach her discipline, has Lady Arithmetic deliver a similar lesson: “then too, I shall not neglect to point out to those who examine the matter that because the monad is unity, it alone is self-sufficient: from it other things are generated; it alone is the seminal force of all numbers.”<sup>52</sup> Counting, therefore, starts with 2. All numbers have gender: “An odd number is called male and an even female.”<sup>53</sup> The odd ones, superior because they are indivisible (primes, we would say), are masculine, while the evens, inferior because they can be split into two warring halves, are feminine.<sup>54</sup> The sum of the first even (2) and the first odd (3) is 5, a “marriage.” As Martianus put it, “[the pentad] represents natural union, for it is the sum of numbers of each sex, for three is considered a male number and two a female number.”<sup>55</sup>

Most prized and all-inclusive is 10, acme of the system. Higher values simply repeat what is already within the first decad, whether by operations among 2–9 (e.g., Scipio’s age  $5 \times 6$ ) or by addition of 10, or multiplication by 10 and its multiples. Lady Arithmetic opines on this concept, too: “The decad must be respected above all other numbers. It contains within itself all numbers with their varied attributes and degrees of perfection.”<sup>56</sup> Emilia’s age at the end of the *Teseida* (likewise the fifteen-day festivities after her nuptials and the epic’s fifteen framing sonnets), while the product of 3 and 5, is also at its core the marriage number 5 augmented by 10. So, too, by Pythagorean reasoning, stanzas 7.30 and 7.50, tagged with the poem’s longest glosses, reduce to 3 and 5.

We can now better understand how Boccaccio’s placement of the Author’s intervention at the Introduction to Day 4 in the *Decameron* has the advantage of articulating his 100 tales, ( $10 \times 10$ )

<sup>52</sup> Martianus Capella, *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, trans. William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson, with E.L. Burge, in *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, ed. Stahl, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press), 2: 276 (7.731); Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, in *Martianus Capella*, ed. Adolphus Dick, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1969), 367 (7.731): “nec dissimulabo ex eo quod monas retractantibus unum, solum ipsam esse ab eaque cetera procreari omniumque numerorum solam seminarium.”

<sup>53</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, 99 (1.6.1); Macrobius, *Commentarii* 2: 18 (1.6.1): “nam impar numerus mas et par femina vocatur.”

<sup>54</sup> See Martianus, *Marriage*, 2: 277–78 (7.732–733); Martianus, *De nuptiis*, 368–69 (7.732–33).

<sup>55</sup> Martianus, *Marriage*, 2: 279 (7.735); Martianus, *De nuptiis*, 371 (7.735): “[pentas] quidem permixtione naturali copulatur; nam constat ex utriusque sexus numero: trias quippe uirilis est, dyas femineus aestimatur.”

<sup>56</sup> Martianus, *Marriage*, 2: 285; Martianus, *De nuptiis*, 375 (7.742): “decas vero ultra omnes habenda. quae omnes numeros diuersae uirtutis ac perfectionis intra se habet.” Dante calls 10 “numero perfetto” in *Vita Nuova*, ch. 29, on Beatrice’s death.

into 30 + 70, for it repeats the numbers comprising his decad of story tellers, 3 men and 7 women, the latter allusive to 4 cardinal + 3 theological virtues.<sup>57</sup> He is thinking abstractly in 3's when he situates three tales turning on 3: Nathan and the three rings (1.3, the third story), Tedaldo de' Lamberti, or degli Agolanti, who had three sons (2.3, the thirteenth story), and a trio of youths who love three sisters (4.3, the thirty-third story). His focus is often on 7, for example, in the seven servants who accompany the frame narrators (4 men + 3 women, meaning that seventeen people leave Florence for the country),<sup>58</sup> or the seventy-seventh tale, longest in the *Decameron* and reserved for Pampinea.

Boccaccio rarely breaks silence on his numerology, an open secret among poets but a secret code nonetheless. The closest he comes in the *Teseida* are the tautological glosses on Emilia's marriage age. They send us a message to take note of the numbers. Boccaccio will later apply discreetly the symbolism of 5 to *Decameron*, Day 5, the only *giornata* when all the stories end with a marriage—even Dioneo's tale resolves as a *marriage à trois*.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, too, we could think of the canonical marriage age in the *Decameron*, so much more consistent at 15 than real life variability, as a number less demographic than symbolic.

A few precious clues in Boccaccio's corpus leave overt evidence of his familiarity with Pythagorean numerology. His earliest nod to it comes in a youthful practice epistle, "Sacre famis et angelice viro dilecto forti" (1339). Never intended to be sent, this florid missive to a "beloved man" filled with a "holy and angelic hunger" for knowledge, outlines the recipient's course of study through the seven liberal arts, starting with the Trivium (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic), and proceeding from those basics to the higher Quadrivium (Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, Astronomy):

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<sup>57</sup> Joan Ferrante, "The Frame Characters of the *Decameron*: A Progression of Virtues," *Romance Philology* 19 (1965): 212–26, was the first, to my knowledge, to attempt a systematic identification of the seven women with seven virtues. In her system, Pampinea was Faith. Lucia Marino, *The Decameron "Cornice: Allusion, Allegory, and Iconology"* (Ravenna: Longo, 1979), 145–57, saw the seven virtues in the female narrators as a group but without clear one-to-one equivalencies. Noting connections between Pampinea and Prudence without actually asserting the identification, she argued that her name, "full of tendrils," alludes to the mythology of Bacchus. Her work has excellent critical history on the frame narrators' identities and intellectual background traditions. For my own identification of the female narrators as the seven virtues, see Kirkham, "An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*."

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Gibaldi, "The *Decameron* Cornice and the Responses to the Disintegration of Civilization," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 24 (1977): 349–57.

<sup>59</sup> The queen is Fiammetta, to whom Boccaccio gives the number 5. He follows Dante, whose Beatrice was a 9, and Petrarch, whose mystical number was 6, the April day when he first saw Laura and she died. See Vinicio Pacca, "Il numero di Fiammetta," *Italianistica: Rivista di Letteratura Italiana* 29, no. 1 (2000): 45–52.

And when you had reached a more mature age, having already seen in arithmetic the powers of even and odd numbers, you pursued music . . . and considered geometric figures . . . and from there you went to the stars.<sup>60</sup>

The Latin “*numerorum virtutes*” alludes to mystic “powers” in numbers, their “strength” as even and odd in a kind of synecdoche for the whole science of Arithmetic. He telegraphs to his correspondent their shared arithmosophia. Whoever has learned the distinction between even and odd would grasp the closely related tenet that numbers are gendered. From this fleeting hint, we deduce much broader familiarity with the system—for example, 5 in its “virtue” as “marriage,” being the sum of the first even 2 and the first odd 3.

Actually, the passage that encapsulates Arithmetic in “*Sacre famis*” originates with Aristotle, who condensed the Pythagorean system into the same even-odd formula. Among the early philosophers, the Stagirite asserts,

the so-called Pythagoreans were the first to take up mathematics . . . [Since] numbers seemed to be the first things in the whole of nature, they supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things . . . [these thinkers] hold that the elements of number are *the even and the odd*, and that of these the latter is limited, and the former unlimited, and that the One proceeds from both of these (for it is both even and odd), and number from the One.<sup>61</sup>

Prominent in the first book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, this passage along with the body of knowledge that underlay it traveled through centuries of cultural authorities, reaching fourteenth-century Tuscany.<sup>62</sup> Dante cites the Aristotelian *locus*—mistaking the source—in his *Convivio*:

<sup>60</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Epistole*, ed. Ginetta Auzzas with a contribution from Augusto Campana, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 5, pt. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 528–29 (4.7): “et quia in fortiolem etatem evaseras, viso iam per arismetricam parium dispariumque numerorum virtutes, voluptuosam musicam sequebaris . . . geometrie figuras aspiciebas . . . Hinc igitur ad astra.”

<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 698 (1.5, 985–86). Boccaccio’s Aristotelian source in this epistle seems not to have been noticed by commentators.

<sup>62</sup> Links in the chain were scholars like Nicomachus of Gerasa, Iamblichus, Martianus Capella, Macrobius, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, and Rabanus Maurus. Gian Roberto Sarolli, “Numero,” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, vol. 4 (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia, 1973), 87–96; available online.

Pittagora, secondo che dice Aristotile nel primo de la Fisica, poneva li principii de le cose naturali lo pari e lo dispari, considerando tutte le cose esser numero

Pythagoras, according to Aristotle in the first book of the *Physics*, held that even and odd were the principles of natural things, since he considered all things to be number. (2.13.18).

As the all-inclusive “principles of natural things,” numbers enjoy an exalted status. Being abstractions, they transcend materiality and belong to the Platonist realm of ideas.<sup>63</sup>

Boccaccio, *au courant* like Dante about “evens” and “odds,” allows a later glimpse into his fascination with number philosophy in the mythographic encyclopedia *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (first draft, 1360). Describing the offspring of Demogorgon, father of all the gods, he comes to Phyton, the seventh child. Demogorgon shaped Phyton, the sun, from a fiery ball of earth, carved out from the Acroceraunian mountain range (in Albania), hammered into a ball on Mt. Caucasus, dipped into the sea beyond Taprobane (Ceylon) six times to temper the globe, and as many times whirled in the air to smooth its surface. To elucidate his arcane source, Pronapides, Boccaccio pauses on the number 6:

it was submerged six times in the waves in imitation of blacksmiths who immerse hot iron in water to make it hard. And I think in this that Pronapides wishes to designate the perfection and eternity of this body, for six is a perfect number comprised of the sum of all its parts, and in this he wished that we recognize the perfection of the artificer and the artifice. In that it was rotated six times, I think that by using the perfect number of the rotation he wished to describe its circular and unfailing movement from which it is never found to deviate or desist.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Number constitutes a kind of bridge between the material and divine worlds. The Neoplatonist Macrobius puts it this way: “in the progress of our thought from our own place to that of the gods, [numbers] present the first example of perfect abstraction” (*Commentary*, 60). Pythagoras must have occupied a special place in Dante’s thought when he wrote the *Convivio*, an encyclopedia that encases and explains three of his *canzoni*. At surface love poems, in allegory they honor the personified mistress of his intellect: “questa donna è quella donna de lo ‘ntelletto che Filosofia si chiama” (*Conv.* 3.11.1). And who invented the word “philosopher”? Pythagoras, who when asked if he were wise, said no, but he was a lover of wisdom: “Questo Pittagora, domandato se egli si riputava sapiente, negò a sè questo vocabulo, e disse sè essere non sapiente, ma amatore di sapienza. E quindi nacque poi, ciascuno studioso in sapienza che fosse ‘amatore di sapienza’ chiamato, cioè ‘filosofo’” (*Conv.* 3.11.3–5).

<sup>64</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, ed. and trans. Jon Solomon, vol. 1, I Tatti Renaissance Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 82–83 (1.7–8): “Mersum tamen ibi sexies undis dicit, imitatus fabrilis actus qui ad durandum ferrum illud fervidum aquis immergunt. Et in hoc arbitror Pronapidem voluisse perfectionem et eternitatem corporis huius designasse. Est quidem sex



As an admirer of 6, “a perfect number” because it is the sum of its factors, he follows in the footsteps of the learned late antique Neoplatonists. Macrobius waxes enthusiastic on the hexad in his *Commentary* on Scipio’s dream:

Six . . . is a number with various and manifold honors and abilities: first because it is the only number under ten that is equal to the sum of its parts. We may divide it by two, three, or six, a half being three, a third two, and a sixth one; the three added together make six.<sup>65</sup>

Martianus is positively rhapsodic, declaring 6 “perfect:”

Who would doubt that the number six is perfect and proportional, since it is the sum of its parts? For six contains within itself a sixth of itself, which is one; a third, which is two; and a half, which is three.<sup>66</sup>

The eminence of “perfect numbers,” first discussed by Euclid (ca. 350 B.C.E.), rests on their rarity—only seven between 1 and 40,000,000.<sup>67</sup> Extolled by the Neoplatonists, they found new admirers among patristic writers. The perfection of 6, for instance, surfaces in commentaries on the Creation, hexameral treatises cited as models for the decameral format of Boccaccio’s masterwork. Augustine (354–430 C.E.), the Church Father wisest in number symbolism, has much to say about six.

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perfectus numerus se ex suis partibus omnibus conficiens, ex quo vult intelligamus et artificis et artificiat perfectionem. Quod autem sexies rotatum sit, puto per numerum perfectum rotationis voluerit eius circularem et indifferentem motum describere, a quo numquam exorbitasse aut destitisse compertum est.”

<sup>65</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, 102 (1.6.12); Macrobius, *Commentarii*, 20 (1.6.12): “senarius . . . variae ac multiplicis religionis et potentiae est, primum quod solus ex omnibus numeris qui intra decem sunt de suis partibus constat. habet enim medietatem et tertiam partem et sextam partem, et est medietas tria, tertia pars due, sexta pars unum, quae omnia simul sex faciunt.”

<sup>66</sup> Martianus, *The Marriage*, 2: 280 (7.736); Martianus, *De nuptiis*, 370 (7.736): “senarum uero perfectum analogicumque esse quis dubitet, cum suis partibus impleatur? nam et sextam sui intra se continet, quod est unum, et tertiam, quod duo, et medietatem, quod tria.”

<sup>67</sup> John MacQueen, *Numerology. Theory and Outline of a Literary Mode* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 55. That series runs 6: 28: 496: 8,128: 130,816: 2,096,128: 33,550,336. On Euclid’s contribution, see Macrobius, *Commentary*, 280 n. 42. The first four were known before Christ. Called today Mersenne Primes, they continue to haunt mathematical scholarship. As of 2017 fifty had been discovered. The most recent is over 49,000,000 digits long. For their history and recent developments, see the website Great Internet Mersenne Prime Search (GIMPS), report from Dec. 21, 2018. Boccaccio may have owned a manuscript of Euclid’s *Geometria* and Boethius’s *Arismetica*. See Mazza, “L’inventario,” no. 2.14.

Now the reason why Scripture records that the creation was made perfect in six days . . . is that six is a perfect number . . . Six, be it noted, is the first number that is the exact sum of its factors, that is to say, its sixth, its third, and its half, that is, of one, two and three, which when added together make six . . . So we see that we should not belittle the theory of numbers, for its great value is eminently clear to the attentive student in many passages of the holy Scriptures. The praises of God do not for nothing include this statement: “Thou has ordered all things by measure and number and weight.”<sup>68</sup>

To close this argument in *The City of God*, Augustine invokes the biblical verse that vindicates all Christian numerology (Wisdom 11:21). In his earlier *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, he expanded on the perfection of 6 by going through the numbers from 2 to 12 and summing their parts. Except for 6, none produces the perfect total. For example, 9 has only 1 and 3 as factors, which add up to a deficient 4, while 12 has 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6, surging to an excessive 16. The Bishop of Hippo then goes on to identify the second perfect number. “After 6 we find 28, which similarly consists of such parts; there are five: one and two and four and seven and fourteen.”<sup>69</sup>

To know 6 as a perfect number is to know its sequel, 28. Dante, who walked “sixth among so much wisdom” alongside the great classical poets in Limbo (*Inf.* 4, 102), will tuck the words “perfetta” and “perfezione” into *Inferno* 6—their only occurrences in the *Commedia*.<sup>70</sup> For *Inferno* 28 he saves the single appearance of the word that explains the pit’s whole system of punishment,

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<sup>68</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. David Wiesen, 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 3: 551–53 (11.30): “Haec autem propter senarii numeri perfectionem eodem die sexiens repetito sex diebus perfecta narrantur . . . quia per senarium numerum est operum significata perfectio. Numerus quippe senarius primus completur suis partibus, id est sexta sui parte et tertia et dimidia, quae sunt unum et due et tria, quae in summam ducta sex fiunt. . . . Unde ratio numeri contemnenda non est, quae in multis sanctorum scripturarum locis quam magni aestimanda sit elucet diligenter intuentibus. Nec frustra in laudibus Dei dictum est: *Omnia in mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti*.” Boccaccio several times cites in his *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante* Augustine’s *City of God*, of which a copy is recorded in the “Parva libreria.” He owned Augustine’s *Commentary on the Psalms* and made a gift of another copy to Petrarch. See Mazza, “L’inventario,” nos. 1.2 and 1.12–13. Cf. Kirkham, “Contrapasso,” on Augustine and the number 6.

<sup>69</sup> Sancti Avreli Avgvstini, *De Genesi ad litteram libri dvodecim*, ed. Joseph Zycha (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1894), 97 (4.2): “post senarium duodetricesimus invenitur, qui similiter suis partibus talibus constat; habet enim eas quinque . . . unum et duo et quattuor et septem et quattuordecim.”

<sup>70</sup> In *Inferno* 6, Dante uses the word “tre” three times and “due” once, the latter hapax in the *Commedia*. They are factors of 6. There is one other occurrence of “two” in Italian, but with an alternate spelling: “li duo serpenti” (*Inf.* 20.44).

“contrapasso.”<sup>71</sup> Properly instructed by Virgil as Reason and finally free to proceed on his own, the pilgrim makes a “perfectly timed” entry into Eden, stepping into the “ancient forest” precisely at the start of *Purgatorio* 28. Its canto address, designated by the second perfect number, affirms the perfection of the place.<sup>72</sup>

Boccaccio understood. Verses and vocabulary from *Purgatorio* 28 reverberate in the *Decameron* when Pampinea and her sisters, led by Elissa, visit the Valley of the Ladies. There, in a third country setting, they will spend their seventh Day. Before that session, however, in time left after brief *novelle* on Day 6, the women explore this secluded sanctuary. At its circular center lies a “small lake” (“laghetto”) stocked with fish. The ladies strip and frolic in the waters, exceptional for their clarity: “senza avere in sé *mistura alcuna*, chiarissimo il suo fondo mostrava esser d’una minutissima ghiaia” (6 Concl., 27). Boccaccio is quoting from the *terzina* that begins at *Purgatorio* 28.28: “Tutte l’acque che son di qua più monde, / Parrieno avere in sé *mistura alcuna* / verso di quella, che nulla nasconde.” [All the waters which here are purest would seem to have some defilement in them, compared with that, which conceals nothing].<sup>73</sup>

More than a single quote from *Purg.* 28.28 enters the Valle delle Donne from Dante’s Eden. Like the Terrestrial Paradise, it is an endearing landscape of diminutives. Compare *Purgatorio* 28 (“augelletti,” “fiumicello,” “donna soletta,” “fioretti”)<sup>74</sup> with Boccaccio’s insistence on suffixes that miniaturize. In order of appearance through the episode (6, Concl., 19–29), they are: “fiumicello,” “sei montagnette,” “montagnette,” “fiumicello,” “montagnette,” “canaletto,” “laghetto,” “laghetto,” “canaletto,” “valloncello,” “pelaghetto.”<sup>75</sup> With a typical flip, Boccaccio takes

<sup>71</sup> It is the “counter-punishment,” meaning that the punishment in Afterlife fits the crime in this life. Victoria Kirkham, “The Long Wait to *Inferno* 28,” *MLN* 127.1, Supplement, “*Tra Amici: Essays in Honor of Giuseppe Mazzotta*” (Jan. 2012): 1–12.

<sup>72</sup> Kirkham, “Dante’s Polysynchrony.”

<sup>73</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), vol. 3, *Purgatorio* 28.28–30; Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton, 6 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970–1975), vol. 3, *Purgatorio* 28.28–30. Branca notes Boccaccio’s source, *Dec.* 1357, n. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Victoria Kirkham, “XXVIII,” in *Dante’s Divine Comedy Introductory Readings II: Purgatorio*, *Lectura Dantis* 12, Supplement (Spring, 1993): 411–32 (414); reprint as “Canto XXVIII: Watching Matelda,” in *Lectura Dantis. Purgatorio: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*, eds. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 311–28 (314).

<sup>75</sup> The last is striking, registered as unique in Italian literature by the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*. Boccaccio is again thinking of the *Commedia*, where “pelago” [ocean deep] appears famously in the poem’s first epic simile and dramatizes

*Purgatorio* 28 atop its mountain as a literary model for his sunken Valley.

Other precedents lie thick on the pages of his own works. The *locus amoenus* was a favored trope, starting with his first fiction.<sup>76</sup> Diana, goddess of the chase, summons noble Neapolitan ladies to a sylvan valley surrounded by “quattro montagnette.” The four landmarks orient four parties of huntresses as they fan out at her instructions in the four cardinal directions to capture a whole bestiary of animals:

In una valle non molto spaziosa,  
di quattro montagnette circuita,  
di verdi erbette e di fiori copiosa,  
nel mezzo della qual così fiorita,  
una fontana chiara, bella e grande,  
abbondevole d’acqua, v’era sita.

There was a valley, not very broad, encircled by four mountainettes, bountiful with green grasslets and flowers, and in its flowering midst there stood a clear fountain, fair, large, and with abundant water (*Caccia* 2.1–6).

Boccaccio’s *Caccia di Diana* reigns in his source, *On Stilicho’s Consulship* by Claudian (ca. 370–ca.404 C.E.), whose poetic tribute to a powerful general ranges thunderously across the Roman empire in a hunt with five groups of nymphs plus those attached to Diana. She commands, “Divide and haste in every direction,” which all six parties do, combing Europe and Africa, “each at the head of her own company.” In a global sweep, “all the beauty, all the terror of the forest is taken.”<sup>77</sup> The *Caccia*, which copies the

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Dante’s near-death by metaphorical drowning before Virgil’s ghost came to the rescue. (*Inf.* 1.22–27). The Certaldan plants “pelago,” similarly located, in his *Decameron* Proem (Pr., 5), but with other dangerous seas in mind, those of “amore.” The hapax “pelaghetto,” synonym for the “lakelet” only chest-deep (“non più profondo che sia una statura d’uomo infino al petto lunga”), tames spiritually menacing waters of *Inferno* 1 and recalls their jocose return in Boccaccio’s lighter vein as the Author who is a recovering lover.

<sup>76</sup> Branca’s commentary, *Dec.*, 1356, n. 1, recalls antecedents for the Valle delle Donne as a *locus amoenus* in *Caccia di Diana*, *Filocolo*, *Ameto*, and *Amorosa visione*.

<sup>77</sup> Claudian, *De Consolatu Stilichonis / On Stilicho’s Consulship*, trans. Maurice Platnauer, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 62–65 (3.275–320): “acceleret divisa manus”; “ducitque cohortem / quaeque suam”; “capitur decus omne timorque / silvarum.” On Claudian in Boccaccio’s first fiction, see *Caccia*, trans. Cassell and Kirkham, 11–12, and 72, n. 18. For the young autodidact, that late antique poet was surely a prized trophy-author, a fortiori given his supposed status as compatriot. Boccaccio refers to Claudian as a Florentine in his *Trattatello* (1.99), and he cites the hunt scene at the conclusion of *Stilicho’s Consulship* in *Genealogia* 5.2, on the first Diana. The inventory that includes books Boccaccio owned lists a manuscript of Claudian’s poetry. See Mazza, “L’inventario,” no. 6.5.

concept, reduces Claudian's grandiose proportions to diminutives in a springtime setting straight out of the Romance lyric tradition, beginning at verse 1: "Nel tempo adorno che *l'erbette* nove / rivestono ogni prato" [in that fair season when the new *grasslets* reclothe each meadow]. Further, Boccaccio keeps the hunt local—just Robert of Anjou's kingdom—in a more mediievally ordered activity that takes its bearings from the four cardinal points, aligned with four "montagnette."<sup>78</sup>

For the Valle delle Donne, he ups the number of mountains. His *mise-en-scène* invokes the word "montagnette" three times, more than any other nounlet in his cluster of diminutives. The second two reinforce the first, which announces how many there are:

il piano, che nella valle era, così era ritondo come se a sesta fosse stato fatto, quantunque artificio della natura e non manual paresse: e era di giro poco più che un mezzo miglio, intorniato di *sei montagnette* . . . Le piagge delle quali *montagnette* così digradando giuso verso il pian discendevano, come ne' teatri veggiamo dalla lor sommità . . . E erano queste piagge . . . tutte di vigne, d'ulivi, di mandorli . . . come se qualunque è di ciò il migliore artefice gli avesse piantati . . . era un fiumicello il quale d'una delle valli, che due di quelle *montagnette* dividea, cadeva . . .

the floor of the valley was perfectly circular in shape, for all the world as if it had been made with a compass, though it seemed the artifice of Nature rather than of man. It was little more than half a mile in circumference, and surrounded by six *mountainettes* . . . the slopes of the hills ranged downwards by degrees toward the floor, as we see with theaters in tiers from the top . . . and these slopes . . . were covered all over in vineyards, olive, and almond trees . . . as if whoever were the best artificer at that had planted them . . . here was a rivulet that fell from from one of the valleys that divided two of those *mountainettes* (6, Concl. 20–25).<sup>79</sup>

Impressive efforts by seasoned locals to situate the Valle delle Donne on a map of Tuscany have targeted a declivity surrounded by five high points, each with a perched villa (Boccaccio speaks of "castles"). His sixth "montagnetta," however, has proven elusive.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Diana sends the first group of ladies "al meriggio," the second "al ponente," the third "a tramontana," and the fourth "verso l'oriente"—south, west, north, and east (*Caccia* 2. 33–48).

<sup>79</sup> I have adapted to more literal form the McWilliam translation, which renders "sei montagnette" as "half a dozen hills," losing the essential 6. It also erases the pairing "arteficio" and "artefice," for which see the quotation on the perfection of 6 in the *Genealogia* below.

<sup>80</sup> Massimo Gennari and Simona Lazzerini, *In viaggio con Boccaccio: I luoghi di Firenze e della Toscana nell'opera del grande narratore* (Certaldo: Federighi, 2013),

No site in the Fiesolan hills is a ready match for this “artifice” of Nature, made by the best “artificer.” Nor could it be. The number 6 here qualifies as the Pythagorean hexad, a sign of defining features not physical but metaphysical.

We must admire all the more how carefully Boccaccio laid out in advance his plan for the *Decameron*. The story tellers escaped Florence “as day was breaking” (“in su lo schiarir del giorno”) and made their first stop at a place “on a little mountainette” (“sopra una piccola montagnetta”) with a villa surrounded by lovely grounds (Days 1 and 2). They arrive in an hour and a half after sunrise at the second (“avanti che mezza terza fosse”), a palace amidst gardens likened to the terrestrial paradise, where they will pass seven Days (3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10): “se Paradiso si potesse in terra fare, non sapevano conoscere che altra forma che quella di quel giardino gli si potesse dare” (3, Intro., 11). The third, remotest, is reserved only for Day 7, most awesome of all numbers within the Pythagorean decad.<sup>81</sup> Its frame tale placement brings into conjunction 7 and 3, echoing the *brigata* split between seven women and three men. Day 6 holds the shortest tales, amusing episodes that turn on quick wit. That lighter schedule allows for the ladies’ adventure to play out in a Valley enclosed by “six mountainettes” while we are still textually in Day 6 territory. The magnetic pull of 6 as a perfect number helps explain why Boccaccio broke the *Decameron* pattern and slotted the Valley over a double diurnal period that allows it to begin late in the afternoon on Day 6 instead of on Day 7 at dawn, the established hour for moving. With Pythagorean legerdemain, he manages to merge the sacred heptad and the perfect hexad.

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Like a palimpsest over *Purgatorio* 28, the space inside 6 hillocks, entered on Day 6, complements the second “perfect number,” embedded at the outset of the *brigata*’s adventure as the eldest narrator’s age (1, Intro., 49). Although in reversed arithmetic order, the two numbers 28 and 6 are surely connected.<sup>82</sup> Each is a symbolic

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“La Valle delle Donne,” 122–26. Gennari argues for a sixth hill that evaded questing predecessors, going back to Giovan Battista Baldelli, *Vita di Giovanni Boccacci* (Florence, 1806). I would like to thank him for guiding me in person on a lovely Fiesolan outing to the very spot where he could point out all six, and for the gift of his book, beautifully illustrated and generously documented. Even though I could only see five, I have enjoyed the book, which has much to teach about Boccaccio.

<sup>81</sup> On the awesome heptad, see Macrobius, *Comm.*, 1.6.45–82.

<sup>82</sup> Dante connected the two. See Otfried Lieberknecht, “Dante’s Historical Arithmetic: The Numbers Six and Twenty-Eight as ‘numeri perfecti secundum partium aggregationem’ in *Inferno* XXVIII,” Paper given at the 32nd International Congress on Medieval Studies, 8–11 May 1997, Western Michigan University (Kalamazoo),

marker, not a real measure. In her twenty-eighth year, Pampinea *is* a 28, as Beatrice *is* a 9. We are reading anachronistically, and certainly against the Certaldan's flexibility between ordinal and cardinal ages, if we reduce the oldest storyteller's to 27. Defined by the second perfect number, Pampinea embodies perfection. How she does so remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, to clinch the coupling of 6 and 28 in Boccaccio's thinking, we can recall her opposite "number" in the *Corbaccio*, an amusing send-up of misogynistic platitudes (ca.1355 or ca. 1365). His pseudo-autobiographical story about a legal scholar foolishly enamored of a grotesque widow, takes the form of a dream vision in which the woman's dead husband sets her besotted admirer straight. Even though he has a right to court the shade's former wife—canon law states that marriage is dissolved on death—he is making a terrible mistake if he thinks this dreadful woman deserves his attentions. Boccaccio upends Dante when he imagines his narrator eavesdropping on a busybody as she points out the widow, alluringly attired in white wimple and black weeds: "The third one seated on that bench is the one I am talking about" ("La terza, che siede in su quella panca, è colei di cui io parlo").<sup>83</sup> Boccaccio must have smiled to the scratchy sound of his quill copying out those words. And these, spoken by the ghost to deride her silly delusions of how young she looks:

negli anni più giovani (quantunque più vicini a quaranta che a trenta fossero, posto che ella, forse non così buona abbachiera li dicesse *ventotto*), fatti—lasciamo stare l'aprile e 'l maggio, ma il dicembre e il gennaio—di *sei* maniere d'erbette verdi o d'altrettante di fiori, donde ch'ella se le avesse, apparecchiare, e, di quelle, certe sua ghirlanduze composte . . . e quivi dall'una delle parti si faceva la fante stare e dall'altra avea forse *sei* ampolluze e vetro sottile e orochico e così fatte bazicature (section 237).

In her younger years (perhaps she does not add very well, since she admitted to *twenty-eight*, although she was closer to forty than thirty), she would arise very early and summon her maid. Let us omit April

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during the session n. 322 (*Problems in Dante's Inferno*, dir. Christopher Kleinhenz, sponsored by the Dante Society of America, [http://www.lieberknecht.de/~diss/papers/p\\_np\\_txt.html](http://www.lieberknecht.de/~diss/papers/p_np_txt.html)).

<sup>83</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Corbaccio*, trans. Anthony K. Cassell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 17. I thank Prof. Cassell (1941–2005) for pointing out the humor of this wry allusion to Dante's *serventese* for sixty women in conversations as collegial friends. Cf. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Corbaccio*, ed. Giorgio Padoan, vol. 5.2 (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), section 93. The narrator tells the ghost that, as church law shows, once a widow she is a free agent: "come tu dalla nostra vita ti dipartisti, secondo che le ecclesiastiche leggi ne mostrano, quella ch'era stata tua donna non fu più tua donna, ma divenne liberamente sua" (*Corbaccio*, ed. Padoan, section 82).

and May—but in December and January, she would first ready *six* species of green plants or as many flowers from wherever she procured them, and out of them make some of those little garlands of hers. Then . . . on one side, she would have the maid stand, and, on the other, she would have perhaps *six* little vials, some thin glass, resin, and other such nonsense (43–44).

There is debate about when Boccaccio wrote the *Corbaccio*, but it was in any event after the *Decameron*, a serious numerical composition like most of the vernacular works that preceded it.<sup>84</sup> With the *Corbaccio* and Latin encyclopedias that follow Boccaccio's Gothic masterpiece, number symbolism all but disappears, discarded as if it were old baggage. What had been serious in the *Decameron* becomes a subject for mockery in the *Corbaccio*, like the medieval misogynistic tradition that Boccaccio satirizes.<sup>85</sup> So, too, as much as he pokes fun at clichés of antifeminism, he drains of value the few numbers he does toss into the text. Nevertheless, his choices are not random: an invective with a woman third on an ordinary bench --as opposed to 9 or 30 or 33 on a roll call in elevated poetry of praise; a shriveled up widow who fancies she looks 28—as opposed to Pampinea, honorable in her prime; and in place of six “mountainettes” six cosmetic “grasslets,” distilled into six puny vials. These *Corbaccio* numbers live on in an afterlife like the widow's ghost, reminders of noble tradition dropped to ridicule for purposes of rhetorical invective.<sup>86</sup>

Although Boccaccio knew other “perfect” ages—33 as Christ's years at death, 35 as the pinnacle of a seventy-year life arc, and 49 as the peak for a man's intellectual development<sup>87</sup>—he chose 28 to capture Pampinea's perfection. To make her 33 would have

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<sup>84</sup> Cassell dates it to 1355 in the Introduction to his translation; Giorgio Padoan, “Sulla datazione del *Corbaccio*,” *Lettere italiane* 15 (1963): 1–27, puts it ten years later, or at least after 1363. See also the Introduction to his edition in *Tutte le opere*.

<sup>85</sup> Millicent Marcus, “Misogyny as Misreading: “A Gloss on *Decameron* VIII.7,” *Stanford Italian Review* 4, no. 1 (1984): 23–40; reprinted in *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, eds. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki (Chapel Hill: Annali d'Italianistica, Inc., 2006), 129–43.

<sup>86</sup> Letizia Panizza, “Rhetoric and Invective in Love's Labyrinth (*Il Corbaccio*),” in *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide*, eds. Kirkham, Sherberg, and Smarr, 183–93.

<sup>87</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *The Basic Works*, trans. McKeon, 1406 (bk.2, ch.14): “The body is in its prime from thirty to five-and-thirty; the mind about forty-nine.” Cf. Macrobius, *Commentary*, 115 (1.6.75): “And now we must call attention to the fact that the number seven multiplied by itself produces the age [49] which is properly considered and called perfect, so that a man of this age, as one who has already attained and not yet passed perfection, is considered ripe in wisdom and not unfit for the exercise of his physical powers. When the decad, which has the highest degree of perfection, of all numbers, is joined to the perfect number seven, and ten times seven or seven times ten years are reached, this is considered by natural philosophers the goal of living, and terminates the full span of human life.”



been blasphemous. At 35, not to mention 49, she would have been fading, and at an opposite extreme, the hexad could only accompany a child. 28 makes her mature but nowhere near the *Corbaccio* widow, a wreck pushing 40.

The better to understand Pampinea's age, qualities, and behavior in Boccaccio's portrait, we can take instruction from St. Thomas Aquinas beginning with his *Summa Theologica*, (ca.1265–1273) Aristotelianism at its most authoritative in Trecento Italy. If we were to compile a job description for her as Prudence, requirements would largely be met by the Dominican's treatise on the virtues. From the moment we meet her in Santa Maria Novella, she is with the other ladies, and she takes charge. Thus for Thomas, "prudence helps all the virtues, and works in all of them."<sup>88</sup> In the *Decameron* they are an ensemble: "The virtues must needs be connected together, so that whoever has one has all." (*ST* 2.2, q. 47, a. 14, rep.).<sup>89</sup> On whether "command is the chief act of prudence," Aquinas succinctly answers, citing Aristotle, "Prudence commands" (*Ibid.*, a. 8, sed contra).<sup>90</sup>

She is a decade older than some of the others, all of whom have reached at least the Florentine age of majority, 18, and all are well beyond the customary age of marriage. Fuller ages are consistent with symbolic status. Why Pampinea especially has to be so old becomes clear if we read on in Aquinas, whose Philosopher says, "young people are not obviously prudent." That is because prudence is not inborn, but has to be learned: "Acquired prudence is caused by the exercise of acts, wherefore 'its acquisition demands experience and time' (*Ethics* 2.1), hence it cannot be in the young, neither in habit nor in act" (*ST* q. 47, a. 14, obj. 3 and ad 3).<sup>91</sup> Again Aquinas quotes the master, "intellectual virtue is both originated and fostered by teaching; it therefore demands experience and time." And he adds in his own words, "Prudence is in the old, not only because their natural disposition calms the movement of

<sup>88</sup> *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1920), 2.2, q. 47, a. 5, ad 2; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 5 vols. (Ottawa: Studii Generalis O. Pr., 1941–1945): "habetur quod prudentia adiuvet omnes virtutes, et in omnibus operetur."

<sup>89</sup> "Dicendum quod necesse est virtutes esse connexas, ita ut qui unam habet omnes habeat."

<sup>90</sup> "Sed contra est quod Philosophus dicit in VI Eth. quod 'prudentia praeceptiva est'."

<sup>91</sup> "Philosophus dicit . . . quod 'iuvenes non constat esse prudentes';" "Dicendum quod prudentia acquisita causatur ex exercitio actuum; unde 'indiget ad sui generationem experimento et tempore', ut dicitur in II Eth. Unde non potest esse in iuvenibus nec secundum habitum nec secundum actum."

the sensitive passions, but also because of their long experience” (*ST* 2.2, q. 47, a. 15, *sed contra*, and *Rep. Obj.* 2).<sup>92</sup>

As an advocate of rational behavior, Pampinea emphasizes reason when urging flight from the city.<sup>93</sup> Her first words to the women in the church assert that no harm comes from the honest use of reason: “a niuna person fa ingiuria chi onestamente usa la sua ragione.”<sup>94</sup> Natural ragione è di ciascuno che ci nasce, la sua vita quanto può aiutare e conservare e difendere” (1, Intro., 52–53). Her words “natural ragione” find a gloss in the commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics* by Aquinas, a copy of which survives in Boccaccio’s own transcription.<sup>95</sup>

[The life of reason] is proper to man, for he receives his specific classification from the fact that he is rational. Now the rational has two parts. One is rational by participation insofar as it is obedient to and is regulated by reason. The other is rational by nature as it can of itself reason and understand. The rational by nature is more properly called rational because a thing possessed intrinsically is always more proper than a thing received from another” [e.g., a teacher].<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> “Sed contra est quod Philosophus dicit in II *Eth.*, quod ‘virtus intellectualis plurimum ex doctrina habet et generationem et augmentum; ideo experimento indiget et tempore’; ‘Dicendum quod prudentia magis est in senibus non solum propter naturalem dispositionem, quietatibus motibus passionum sensibilibus, sed etiam propter experientiam longi temporis.’”

<sup>93</sup> Many scholars have recognized her association with reason but without connecting her to Prudence in the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas as I have. See Kirkham, “An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*.” For some enjoyable reads on the subject, see also Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, “La ‘Cornice’ del ‘Decameron’ o il mito di Robinson,” 5–63, in *Il potere della parola: Studi sul Decameron* (Naples: Federico & Ardia, 1989), 19–22: Pampinea recalls the *brigata* to “razionalità naturale.” Michael Sherberg, *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the Decameron* (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 2011), 39, refers to her as “sublimely rational.” Marco Veglia, “Messer Decameron Galeotto. Un titolo e una chiave di lettura,” *Heliotropia* 8–9 (2011–12): 99–112, calls the pandering book “viatico di vita, di piacere, di un feast of reason” (107).

<sup>94</sup> The concept comes from Cicero. See Paolo Cherchi, *L’onestade e l’onesto raccontare del Decameron* (Florence: Cadmo, 2004), 90.

<sup>95</sup> Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana A 204 inf. (1339–1341). For a description see *Boccaccio autore e copista*, ed. De Robertis, et al., 348–50 (cat. no. 64).

<sup>96</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 1, lesson 10, 118–130; Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, ed. Order of Preachers, 2 vols. (Rome: ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1969), vol. 1, 36a, online at <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ctc0104.html>: “vita quae est operativa secundum rationem, quae quidem vita propria est homini, nam homo speciem sortitur ex hoc quod est rationalis. Sed rationale est duplex: unum quidem participative, in quantum scilicet persuadetur et regulatur a ratione; aliud vero est rationale essentialiter, quod scilicet habet ex se ipso ratiocinari et intelligere; et haec quidem pars principalius rationalis dicitur, nam illud quod dicitur per se semper est principalius eo quod est per aliud.”

What distinguishes us as humans from other living creatures is our rational faculty, partly inborn and partly acquired through learning. Pampinea's "natural ragione" is the former, a force that makes it instinctive for us to protect our lives. At the same time, her decision to flee death and embrace life draws on learning she has accumulated and recalls a nod to Augustine's definition of Prudence, "the science of what to desire and what to avoid" (*ST* 2.2. q. 47, a 4, ad 1).<sup>97</sup> So, too, the book named *Decameron* will teach its reading public, "quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare" (Pr. 14).

Recognizing, further, that things cannot long endure without order, she advises appointing a ruler for each day: "per ciò che le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare . . . estimo che di necessità sia convenire esser tra noi alcuno principale, il quale noi e onoriamo e ubidiamo come maggiore, nel quale ogni pensiero stea di doverci a lietamente vivere disporre" (1, Intro., 95). Again parsing her words with Aquinas as key, we find in the opening statement of his commentary on the *Ethics*:

As the Philosopher says in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, it is the business of the wise man to order. The reason for this is that wisdom is the most powerful perfection of reason, whose characteristic is to know order.<sup>98</sup>

Boccaccio was the first Italian *novelliere* to devise a master novella to carry all the others, divided into Days ruled by kings and queens. Where did this idea come from? It takes form early on in his *Filocolo* with a rustivating *brigata* presided over by Queen Fiammetta for the debate on thirteen "Questioni d'amore," an episode indebted to the tradition of ladies as authorities in love casuistry, reflected in the *De amore* by Andreas Capellanus.<sup>99</sup> Pampinea's origins as a character, however, reach well beyond that early romance. Not just Prudence broadly, she personifies a particular type of that virtue, for Aquinas the most admirable of all:

It belongs to prudence to govern and command, so that wherever in human acts we find a special kind of governance and command, there

<sup>97</sup> Augustine says "quod prudentia est 'appetendarum et vitandarum rerum scientia.'"

<sup>98</sup> *Comm. Ethics*, trans. Litzinger, 1: 6 (1.1.1); Aquinas, *Sent. libri ethicorum*, 1.1.1, online at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/ctc0101.html>: "Sicut philosophus dicit in principio metaphysicae, sapientis est ordinare. Cuius ratio est, quia sapientia est potissima perfectio rationis, cuius proprium est cognoscere ordinem."

<sup>99</sup> Victoria Kirkham, "The *Filocolo* of Giovanni Boccaccio with an English Translation of the Thirteen *Questioni d'amore*," Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1972.

must be a special kind of prudence. Now it is evident that there is a special and perfect kind of governance in one who has to govern not only himself but also the perfect community of a city or kingdom; because a government is the more perfect according as it is more universal, extends to more matters, and attains a higher end. Hence prudence in its special and most perfect sense, belongs to a king who is charged with the government of a city or kingdom: for which reason a species of prudence is reckoned to be reignative.”<sup>100</sup>

The prudent person imposes order on his own psyche and life, but it is a far greater thing to extend that to “a city or kingdom,” which is just what Pampinea does in the *Decameron*. In fact, she herself will be the first “principale,” Queen of Day 1. She personifies the most perfect virtue of “reignative” prudence.

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Conspicuous in the Pythagorean arsenal, 28 is not only perfect as the sum of its factors, but also because it is the sum of the first seven numbers ( $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 = 28$ ). Hence 28, in a variant expression, *is* 7.<sup>101</sup> For the *Decameron* 7 refers most obviously to the Seven Virtues, personified by the female narrators. Among multiple other associations, the marvelous heptad also resonates as a symbol of Wisdom (Latin *Sapientia*), philosophical sister of Prudence. Their close kinship is clear from what Aquinas says quoting Aristotle: “prudence is wisdom for man” (*ST* 2.2, q. 47, a. 2, ad 1). Martianus Capella calls 7 Minerva, the virgin goddess of wisdom.<sup>102</sup> Biblical verse gives seven pillars of wisdom: “Wisdom hath built herself a house, she hath hewn her out seven pillars”

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<sup>100</sup> Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* 2.2, q. 50 a.1, resp.: “ad prudentiam pertinet regere et praecipere. Et ideo ubi invenitur specialis ratio regiminis et praecepti in humanis actibus, ibi etiam invenitur specialis ratio prudentiae. Manifestum est autem quod in eo qui non solum seipsum habet regere, sed etiam communitatem perfectam civitatis vel regni, invenitur specialis et perfecta ratio regiminis; tanto enim regimen perfectius est quantus est universalis, ad plura se extendans et ulteriorem finem attingens. Et ideo regi, ad quem pertinet regere civitatem vel regnum, prudentia competit secundum specialem et perfectissimam sui rationem. Et propter hoc regnativa ponitur species prudentiae.”

<sup>101</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, 110 (1.6.52): “Seven is the source of this [lunar] number of twenty-eight days, for if you add the numbers from one to seven, the total is twenty-eight”; Macrobius, *Commentarii* 27–28 (1.6.52): Huius ergo viginti octo dierum numeri septenarius origo est. nam si ab uno usque ad septem quantum singuli numeri exprimunt tantum antecedentibus addendo procedas, invenies viginti octo nata de septem.” Cf. Heinz Meyer, *Die Zahlenallegorese im Mittelalter: Methode und Gebrauch* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1975), 155, on the Venerable Bede’s understanding of 28, “die Summe der ganzen Zahlen von der Eins bis zur Sieben und hat so denselben Sinn wie die Siebenzahl.”

<sup>102</sup> Martianus, *De nuptiis*, 373 (738): “hic numerus lunae cursum significat; nam unum, duo tria, quattuor, quinque, sex, septem XXVIII faciunt.”

(Prov. 9:1, Douay).<sup>103</sup> Pampinea, partial to tales of wisdom and its opposite (*stultitia*), pulls 7 into her gravitational field. As her first offering, she tells the story of Maestro Alberto of Bologna, a learned doctor of medicine “close to seventy years old” (“vecchio di presso a settanta anni” – 1.10). Three times she tells stories in the seventh position (8.7, 9.7, 10.7), beginning with the seventy-seventh, longest in the *Decameron*. A prequel to the *Corbaccio*, it stages with meticulous symmetry the scholar Rinieri’s revenge on a vain, foolish widow, whom he thrice instructs to reiterate an incantation “seven times.”<sup>104</sup> Patterns at multiple levels, down to lexical recurrences, join 7 and 3 in the *Decameron*, repeating the master novella’s pairing of seven women and three men.

If Pampinea at 28 personifies reignative prudence and the related power of wisdom, what about her name? Why is Pampinea Pampinea? Heir to her status as oldest story teller from Mopsa-Prudence in the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* (1341–1342), she has a congener who puts in a fleeting appearance in that pastoral allegory as a lady Caleon loved before Fiammetta (*Com. nin.* 35.78). Boccaccio’s second eclogue is called *Pampinea*, but that titular lady has no speaking part in a monologue recited by the shepherd Palemone, lovelorn because she has left him. By contrast, she comes right to the forefront in the *Decameron*. It is difficult to see Boccaccio’s rationale for plucking that name from obscurity to christen his leading lady in the *cornice*.

Boccaccio would have known cognates of her name, which modern scholars have interpreted loosely as “la rigogliosa” (“luxuriant”), “flourishing,” “blooming,” “vigorous”; or more closely, “garlanded with vine leaves.”<sup>105</sup> Pampinea is the feminine form of a Latin adjective, “pampineus” (“full of tendrils or vine leaves”), from the noun “pampinus” (“tendrill or young shoot of a vine”). In a narrow technical sense, “pampinus” refers to an early stage of the

<sup>103</sup> “Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum, excedit columnas septem” (Vulgate).

<sup>104</sup> Robert Durling, “A Long Day in the Sun: *Decameron* 8.7,” in *Shakespeare’s ‘Rough Magic’: Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber*, eds. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 269–75.

<sup>105</sup> It is lost in Branca’s “la rigogliosa,” an often cited gloss, perhaps suggested by the vine’s robust luxuriance. Rebhorn, translating Branca, interprets her name as meaning “the blooming one” (*The Decameron*, lxvii). Teodolinda Barolini, “The Wheel of the *Decameron*,” *Romance Philology* 36 (1983): 521–39; reprinted in Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 224–44 (228), calls her “vigorous.” Smarr attributes the name’s invention to Boccaccio and says it means “garlanded with vine leaves” (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Eclogues*, ed. and trans. Janet Levarie Smarr (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 209).

plant's growth, when it has produced tendrils ("pampini") but not yet fruited. More broadly, it stands for the grape vine.<sup>106</sup>

Among Sapientia's pronouncements in the book of Ecclesiasticus, which emphasize her great age as "firstborn of all God's creatures" (Ecclus. 24:5), there is one that transforms Wisdom metaphorically into a vine: "Ego quasi vitis fructificavi suavitatem odoris / et flores mei fructus honoris et *honestatis*" (Ecclus. 24:23): "Like the vine, I have born the fruit of a sweet fragrance. And my flowers are the fruit of honor and *integrity*."<sup>107</sup> The qualities of this Biblical vine that bears "honor and *integrity*" [Latin *honestas*, Italian *onestà*] match Pampinea and her ladies, praised for their elevated moral qualities, in particular "onestà."

"Onestà" from the Latin *honestas*, recurs with its cognates ("onesto," "onestamente," "disonesti," "disonestamente"), throughout to emphasize how "honorably" the narrators conduct themselves in contrast to their foils, people who are "disonesti." In Boccaccio's usage, inherited from Roman moral authorities, the concept is much broader than today, opening a semantic field that implies many virtues: integrity, worth, nobility of behavior, respectability, dignity, decorum, courtesy.<sup>108</sup> "Onestà" is an elevated ideal, unwavering and sustained in the *Decameron* frame tale from start to finish: They are an "onesta brigata" (Pr., 13); the Author will guide the ladies "onestamente" (1, Intro., 7); they will flee

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<sup>106</sup> Thus Claudian, whom he adapts for *Caccia di Diana*, had used it at the end of his poem on Stilicho's consulship to describe a Bacchic frenzy that takes over the fleet as it returns to Rome with prey from Diana's hunt: "the pliant vine entwines the mast" ("malum circumflua vestit / pampinus" – *De cons. Stil.* 3.366–67). Two of Petrarch's *Metrical Epistles* also relish this specialized term. In one it appears with the related noun *palmes*, *palmitis*, meaning "young branch or shoot of a vine," further documented in Charleton C. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879; reprint 1969), s.v., "palmes": "Palmitum duo genera sunt, alterum pampinarium, alterum fructuarium." *Met.* 1.8 to his friend Lelio speaks of his garden, where a nightingale hops around under the vine on its tendrils ("sub palmite gaudens / ludere pampineo.") In *Met.* 1.10, to Giovanni Colonna, he reports a terrible storm with hail that ripped off the crowns of the vine shoots: "nunc tecta sonant, et grandine crebra / circum pampineae Bromio cecidere coronae." For the texts, see *Poesie minori del Petrarca sul testo latino ora corretto e volgarizzate da poeti viventi o da poco defunti*, ed. Domenico de' Rossetti, 3 vols. (Milan: Società Tipografica dei Classici Italiani, 1834). I thank Michael Papio for the Petrarch references.

<sup>107</sup> Translation of Ecclus. 24:23 from the Catholic Public Domain version of the Bible (CPDV). The Douay, which I otherwise cite, renders *honestatis* in this verse too narrowly as "riches." Ecclus. 24:5: "Ego ex ore Altissimi prodivi, primogenita ante omnem creaturam; 24:14: "Ab initio in ante saecula creata sum / et usque ad futurum saeculum non desinam" ["From the beginning, and before the world, was I created, and unto the world to come I shall not cease to be"].

<sup>108</sup> Cherchi, *L'onestade*, 89–90, and passim. Translations of "onesta brigata" vary, e.g., *Decameron*, 1620, "a faire and worthy assembly of seven Honourable Ladies and three Noble Gentlemen"; McWilliam, "worthy band"; Musa-Bondanella, "a worthy group"; Payne-Singleton, "an honorable company"; Waldman, "a goodly company."

“like death” the “disonesti esempli” of others and retire “onestamente” to their country places (1, Intro., 65); it is no more unseemly for the ladies to leave the city “onestamente,” as Pampinea argues, than for others to stay behind “disonestamente” (1, Intro., 72). The semantic cluster returns forcefully at the final Day’s conclusion, as King Panfilo speaks. We have acted honorably (“onestamente abbiamo fatto,”), he sums up, and even though we have told risqué stories, they haven’t incited us to things less than honorable (“a cose meno oneste”). He has seen nothing but “continua onestà, continua concordia, continua fraterna dimestichezza” (10, Concl., 4–5). In the end, they take his advice to return home as “useful and honorable” (“ultimamente presero per utile e per onesto il consiglio del re” – 10, Concl., 8). Stories both delightful and useful, as the Proem promised, in retrospective evaluation have engaged Boccaccio’s *brigata* in its enactment of “onestà,” behavior that conforms to what Cicero and Seneca considered the *summum bonum*.<sup>109</sup>

★ ★ ★

Boccaccio’s frame tale unfolds in a moral realm of consummate good signaled by far-reaching symbols of perfection. From its title rubric, the *Decameron* as a whole displays four great governing numbers, optimal in arithmosophia: first are the all-containing 10, limit of numbers, and its square 100, both sprung from their all-surpassing source in Monad-Unity; second, the decad settles into alternate expression as the sum of its powerful addends, 7 and 3. For the Pythagoreans 3 is foundational as the first masculine number, (the first prime), and 7 is maximal as the most venerated below 10.

Critics have accustomed us to comparing the *Decameron* and *Commedia* for their centuplex structure, and we have seen Boccaccio’s dialogue with *Purgatorio* 28 in his Valle delle Donne. Its seven visiting ladies further recall the seven Virtue-nymphs who dance as 4 + 3 on either side of Christ’s chariot later in the pilgrim’s progress through Eden.<sup>110</sup> If 7 figures the Virtues for both the Certaldan and his Dante, what about 3? In a Christian context, its significance as Trinity overshadows all others, hence Dante’s Beatrice is a 9 (3 x 3), and he invented *terza rima* as metrical vehicle for the

<sup>109</sup> Cherchi, *L’onestade*, 25–37.

<sup>110</sup> They are designated “tutte e sette” in both texts (*Dec.* 6, Concl. 30; *Purg.* 33.13), as Thomas C. Stillinger astutely observes, in “The Language of Gardens: Boccaccio’s ‘Valle delle Donne,’” *Traditio* 39 (1983): 301–21. He also follows Branca in noting that the “precise quotation” of *Purg.* 28.28–30 is “enough to suggest the presence of Dante’s Earthly Paradise behind Boccaccio’s Valley.”

*Commedia*. The *Decameron*'s three male narrators bear no analogies to the Godhead, but they are entitled to the positive aura of 3. Read against a Pythagorean grid, they find a numerical denominator fully compatible with their symbolic roles: Panfilo as the higher rational faculty, Reason; Filostrato and Dioneo as the lower sensitive appetites, the Irascible and the Concupiscible.<sup>111</sup> Macrobius could not have put it more clearly: "The number three, indeed, marks the three divisions of the soul" ("ternarius vero assignat animam tribus suis partibus absolutam" – 2.6.42).<sup>112</sup>

After the title, few quantities float into the prose. Our Author records the plague's arrival with a solemn Christian calendrical formula, "one thousand three hundred and forty-eight years from the Incarnation of the Son of God." He tells us those infected mostly die by the "third day." Survivors stuff "two or three" bodies into a single casket. Numeric crescendo gives a sense of the spreading contagion, from deaths of "two or three" siblings in a single family, to "three or four coffins" carried at once, then double that to "six or eight" (1, Intro., 39–41). Suddenly, substantial and precise numbers push through the chaos: "sette giovani donne" in Santa Maria Novella, none past "li venti eottesimo anno" and none less than "diciotto" (1, Intro., 49). Soon the men file in, "tre giovani," none younger than "venticinque anni" (1, Intro., 78). Seemingly "realistic," all participate in the frame's code of perfection. 25 and 18 are threshold ages of adulthood, a kind of perfection under

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<sup>111</sup> For fuller discussion, see Kirkham, "An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*."

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Martianus, *De nuptiis* 733: "The soul has a threefold division into reason, emotion, and appetite."



the law, and 28 is the second perfect number.<sup>113</sup> Significantly its appearance here is hapax in the *Decameron*.<sup>114</sup>

Companion and complement to 28, 6 as the first perfect number shapes the landscape on Days 6 and 7 as “sei montagnette.” On one level they are symbols of Venus, invisibly present.<sup>115</sup> Martianus Capella has good reasons for giving to her the hexad.

The number six is assigned to Venus, for it is formed of the union of the sexes; that is, of the triad, which is male because it is an odd number, and the dyad, which is female because it is even, and twice three makes six.<sup>116</sup>

Smilingly, Boccaccio makes the connection in his youthful *Filocolo*, an epic romance that comes with a good complement of Olympians to keep the action moving. Venus descends from her third heaven thirteen times to assure a happy outcome in marriage for Florio and Biancifiore’s star-crossed love.<sup>117</sup> Not long after she has put in a monitory dream appearance, the protagonist sets off to

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<sup>113</sup> Coinciding with the days of the lunar month (Martianus, *De nuptiis*, 373 [738]), 28 has a slim tradition in numerology outside its well known importance as the second perfect number. Whoever wrote the Irish *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbati* (9th–10th c.) must have known its perfection, which paces an ocean journey to the blessed isle with 4 x 7 stops. See MacQueen, *Numerology*, 18–25. Biblical exegetes know only one occurrence, the twenty-eight-cubit length of the curtains in the Tabernacle that God instructed Moses to build for the tablets of the Law (Ex. 26:2). Augustine and Bede, for example, had to perform some acrobatics to explicate it, which they managed by breaking the number down to 4 x 7. For Bede it signifies “the everlasting repose that devout Christians can hope for through their faith in the Four Gospels on a pathway in life oriented to the Four Cardinal Virtues.” See Kirkham, “A Perfectly Timed Entry into Eden.” In the sixteenth century Benedetto Varchi would adopt 28 as the defining number of his love for Lorenzo Lenzi, his “lauro,” following in the footsteps of Petrarch, who had already seized 6 as the number of his love for Laura, whom he first saw on April 6 and who died on the same day of the month. See Laura Paolino, “Il ‘geminato ardore’ di Benedetto Varchi: Storia e costruzione di un canzoniere ‘elittico’,” *Nuova Rivista di Letteratura Italiana* 6, no. 12 (2004): 233–314. Varchi was intrigued by Pythagorean numerology, still strong in the Renaissance. See Ann Moyer, *The Philosophers’ Game: Rithmomachia in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

<sup>114</sup> The word “venticinque” does appear elsewhere, but without plot development. Pericone, for example, has a twenty-five-year old brother Marato, who murders him to steal Alatiel, only to be soon murdered himself (2.7.32). In other contexts, it does not refer to age: “un guato di ben venticinque fanti” (5.3.13); “una brigata forse di venticinque uomini” (8.9.19). Dom Felice seduces his parishoner’s wife Monna Isabetta, “giovane ancora di ventotto in trenta anni” (3.4.6).

<sup>115</sup> Edith Kern, “The Gardens in the *Decameron* Cornice,” *PMLA* 66 (1951): 505–23, sees the Valley as a place of Venus Genetrix.

<sup>116</sup> Martianus, *De nuptiis*, 7.736: “hic autem numerus Veneri est attributus, quod ex utriusque sexus commixtione conficitur, id est ex triade, qui mas, quod impar est numerus, habetur, et dyade, quae femina paritate; nam bis terni sexis faciunt.”

<sup>117</sup> *Fabulous Vernacular*, 170–71.

rescue his lady. The mission requires full armor, down to a small shield over his shoulder with six red rosettes on a golden field: “un bello scudetto ... risplendente di fino oro, nel quale sei rosette vermiglie campeggiavano” (*Filoc.* 2.45.3–4). Mythographers, including Boccaccio (*Gen. deor.* 3.22), knew as a commonplace that roses were an attribute of Venus. He likens the ladies bathing in the Valley’s clear waters of a circular little lake to a vermilion rose under glass.<sup>118</sup>

Beyond Venus, the hexad that crowns the Valle delle Donne resonates arithmetically as perfection. It appears at the remotest point of the *brigata*’s “allegorical peregrination,” from infernal Florence through three country settings in an ideal progression.<sup>119</sup> The first, a delightful villa and garden, has features generically bucolic; the second is like “paradise on earth,” and the third, entered by a narrow path (Matthew 7:14) and banked like an amphitheater that recalls Dante’s heavenly rose, adds hints of a celestial paradise. Perhaps it is a foretaste of heaven.<sup>120</sup> Venus is there, metaphorically in her rose, but she does not descend in a *dénouement* as Grace, her allegorical persona at the close of the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, an epiphany that reprises her role in *Caccia di Diana*, where she displaced Diana to preside over the symbolic conversion and baptism of beasts who become young men cloaked in crimson, the color not of roses but charity. Her presence, quite right on Di-  
oneo’s Day, is no longer Christian, and it is much attenuated, controlled by virtue and reason.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Many literary sources underlie this beautiful simile. Stillinger, “The Language of Gardens,” 317, traces several in the *Romance of the Rose* and Ovid. He sees the Valley as a formation like the female vagina, recalling the servants’ quarrel at the beginning of Day 6 with its reference to the “Monte Nero” (cf. *mons Veneris*). That reading appeals to Tobias Foster Gittes, “Boccaccio’s Valley of the Women: Fetishized Foreplay in *Decameron* VI,” *Italica* 76 (1999): 147–74, who sees the scene as a kind of “terrarium,” where the ladies are trapped in “erotic bondage” for the benefit of voyeurs hidden in the hilltop castles, “who look down on them from the windows of the six villas” (152).

<sup>119</sup> Kern, “The Gardens,” speaks of the *brigata*’s “peregrinazione allegorica” and the rising progression in the settings.

<sup>120</sup> The landscapes of all three settings have traditional medieval Edenic features. Cf. Dante’s “selva antica,” a perfect place of eternal springtime, “qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto” (*Purg.* 28.143). Still valuable in describing their features are the classic studies by Arturo Graf, *Miti, leggende e superstizioni del Medio Evo* (Turin: Loescher, 1892–1893); Howard Rollin Patch, *The Other World* (1950; reprint New York: Octagon Books, 1980).

<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Usher, “Frame and Gardens in the *Decameron*,” *Medium Aevum* 58, no. 2 (1989): 274–285. In Boccaccio’s eclectic numerology—astrological, Christian, Pythagorean—Venus as goddess of the third heaven may be layered into the Valle, the third story telling setting, and she does seem to levitate over amorous content on Day 3.

Collateral evidence that Boccaccio was thinking of the connection between 6 here and the concept of perfection comes from a passage we have already visited in his *Genealogia deorum gentilium*. If jocular sarcasm in the *Corbaccio* couples 28 and 6 to suggest how he linked those two integers in his mind, a collateral chain of associations connecting 6 to the Valley landscape lies in Demogorgon's fashioning of Python. Explaining how the progenitor of the pagan gods tempered his newly wrought sun six times in the ocean's waves and whirled it in perfect circular motion six times, Boccaccio refers to him as "artificer" and what he wrought as "artifice": "Est quidem *sex perfectus numerus* se ex suis partibus omnibus conficiens, ex quo vult intelligamus et *artificis* et *artificiati perfectionem*." The same words, "artefice" and "artificer" apply to the perfectly round lake below the six mountainettes, which seemed "*artificio della natura e non manual*." Terraces descending the slopes, and cultivated with vineyards (named before all other plants), look as if the best *artificer* had planted them, "come se qualunque è di ciò il migliore *artefice* gli avesse piantati." The perfect artificer, of course, is God, Demogorgon's Christian counterpart, who as master architect laid out the universe with his compass. Dante so knows the Maker (*Par.* 19.40), from the words of Sapientia, that most ancient of ladies who was with him from the beginning: "When he prepared the heavens, I was present: when with a certain law and compass he enclosed the depths." (Proverbs 8:27).<sup>122</sup>

As another symbol of perfection, the perfectly round valley floor, complements circular formations assumed by the narrators. When the ladies begin talking after mass in Santa Maria Novella, they sit in a loose circle, "quasi in cerchio a seder postesi" (1, Intro., 52). It tightens in the countryside, becoming part of the order in their daily ritual, "tutti sopra la verde erba si puosero in cerchio a sedere" (1, Intro. 109).<sup>123</sup> How do we know the circle is a perfect form? The "master of those who know" had said it, *ipse dixit*: "The perfect is naturally prior to the imperfect, and the circle is a perfect thing."<sup>124</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Prov. 8:27: "Quando praeparabat caelos aderam, / quando certa lege et gyro vallabat abyssos."

<sup>123</sup> Boccaccio carries the circle into the *Decameron* from his *Filocolo* (e.g., 4.43.4, 4.55.1, 4.67.1) and *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* (17.7: "in cerchio si posero a sedere"). See on the former Victoria Kirkham, "Reckoning with Boccaccio's 'Questioni d'amore'," *MLN* 89, no. 1 (1974: 47–59; updated in Ead., *Fabulous Vernacular*, 186–99).

<sup>124</sup> *De caelo* (*On the Heavens*), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 400 (1.2; 269a).

Perfections accumulate in the frame: perfect numbers, perfect circular formations, and Prudence at 28. Active in her most powerful perfection, as wisdom-Pampinea, she is both perfecting (prudence perfects the soul's rational faculty) and perfected (in her capacity as ruler, "reignative"). As reignative Prudence she commands, performing in allegory what would be impossible in reality, where "Man is the head of woman" (Eph. 5:23; 1, Intro, 76). St. Paul's dictum correlates with women's legal position in Boccaccio's city: "There was practically no legal act a Florentine woman could undertake without the consent of a male guardian."<sup>125</sup> To imagine seven young women escaping to the country for two weeks, even with a trio of male escorts, is sheer fantasy.

★ ★ ★

Although convenient, the term *cornice* meaning "frame" has faded in critical favor and given way among some to a more fashionable "novella portante."<sup>126</sup> We might bring that into English as "master novella"—the story that carries all the others. Scholarly literature on the frame is abundant, with general agreement that it counters the disintegration of society in plague-infested Florence.<sup>127</sup> In contrast to Dante's Afterworld, Boccaccio's Counter-world requires no expert guides, no supernatural transportation like Geryon or spiritual wings, no journey across the cosmos from earth's center to the Empyrean. It is just a short remove from Florence, into the kind of idyllic bucolic space the poet had already created for his *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, *Ninfale fiesolano*, and *Eclogues*. Close as it is to the city, this countryside might as well be outside reality. The meadows the young people traipse and haunt are nowhere to be found in Tuscany. Their comportment is unfailingly civil and chaste. They speak the most perfect language possible, paragons of Aristotelian *eutrapelia*.<sup>128</sup> Together the ten narrators incarnate in

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<sup>125</sup> Thomas Kuehn, "Person and Gender in the Laws," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 87-106 (101).

<sup>126</sup> Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Boccaccio* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2000), 156; Bausi, *Leggere il Decameron*, 15-16.

<sup>127</sup> Bàrberi Squarotti, "Il mito di Robinson," likens it to Robinson Crusoe's desert isle; for Barolini, "The Wheel," 227, "moral turpitude of the pestilential city gives way to the 'leggiadra onestà' of the brigata"; Battaglia Ricci, *Ragionare nel giardino: Boccaccio e i cicli pittorici del "Trionfo della Morte"* (Rome: Salerno, 1987), 94, 157: a return to Eden; an icon that represents metaphorically "l'attività creatrice della poesia"; Joy Hambuechen Potter, *Five Frames for the Decameron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 11-40, a retreat in liminal space (in anthropological terms). Usher, "Frame and Novella Gardens," an anti-type to the city.

<sup>128</sup> Victoria Kirkham, "The Word, the Flesh, and the *Decameron*," *Romance Philology* 41.2 (Nov. 1987): 127-49.

allegory an ideal human being, their collective representing a person endowed with all the virtues and a well-ordered tripartite soul. Their relationship to the stories involves them in a spiritual soul-battle, a psychomachia, in which virtues conquer contrary vices dramatized in the *novelle* they relate, and reason prevails over the appetites.<sup>129</sup>

As early as *Caccia di Diana* Boccaccio had staged a “battle” between virtue-nymphs and beasts like the three in Dante’s “selva oscura,” starting with a stag-narrator transformed by the descent of Venus into a “creatura umana / e razionale essere per certo” (18.11–12). The dénouement of that hunt fantasy, literally metamorphosis, signifies at a spiritual level conversion to rational Christian life. The *Teseida* renews that psychomachy with a poetic fiction in which Reason (Teseo) controls the appetites (Arcita-Ire, Palemone-Lust) and at the end a pre-Christian matrimonial Venus triumphs. In the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, Seven Virtues overcome Seven Vices, and Venus descends as the heavenly light of Trinitarian Grace, “Io son luce del cielo unica e trina” (*Com. nin.* 41.1). The eldest nymph and first to tell her story is Pampinea’s literary “mother”: Mopsa (in pastoral), the virtue Prudence (in allegory), and Lottiera di Odoaldo dei Visdomini della Tosa (in history).<sup>130</sup> Structurally the *Decameron* resembles the *Comedia delle ninfe* as a collection of stories told by Seven Virtues inside a bucolic frame, but allegorically it is closer to the *Teseida*, staging the soul’s rational faculty and virtue triumphant. Allegory in the *Decameron* is less about conversion and salvation than morality and reason.<sup>131</sup> Christian goodness modulates to the secular ideal of *summun bonum*.

*Cornice*, a word not used by Boccaccio, calls to mind a constraining image. A “frame” boxes in the tales, recalling medieval visual narratives divided into horizontal rectangles like Giotto’s

<sup>129</sup> For examples of these oppositions, see Kirkham, “An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*.”

<sup>130</sup> Boccaccio dangles the clues to tell us as much, hoping to win patronage and tickle gossip interest. See the commentary in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, ed. Antonio Enzo Quaglio, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 2 (1967), 926, n. 21. Usher, “Frame and Novella Gardens,” 276, proposes in connection with Adiona’s story (ch. 26): “Behind the allegorical personifications, Boccaccio is perhaps suggesting that within the soul (Ameto), temperance (Adiona), if properly contemplated and actively cultivated (Pomena), can channel base instincts (Dioneo) to worthy ends.”

<sup>131</sup> Victoria Kirkham, “Morale,” in *Lessico critico decameroniano*, eds. Renzo Bragantini and Pier Massimo Forni (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri Editore, 1995), 249–68; “Morals,” in *The Decameron: A Critical Lexicon (Lessico Critico Decameroniano)*, eds. Pier Massimo Forni and Renzo Bragantini, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz and trans. Michael Papio (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2018), 212–29.

frescos in the Scrovegni Chapel with their bands of Old and New Testament scenes along either side of the nave. Boccaccio's master novella seems instead to hover above the stories in a hierarchical relationship. It recalls Trecento frescos like Giotto's *Last Judgment* at Padua (1306), Buffalmacco's *Triumph of Death* at the Pisan Camposanto (ca.1336),<sup>132</sup> and Andrea Buonaiuto's *Way to Salvation* in the Dominican chapter house of Santa Maria Novella (commissioned 1365). Such a pairing of *cornice* and *novelle* presents conceptually two tiers on a vertical axis, a space at top idealized and at bottom realistic. Boccaccio empties the master tale of municipal chronicle and "paints" that into the lower portions, reserving what is above in the hierarchy for a "peregrinazione allegorica." Put another way, the upper zone is heavenly, or better Edenic and heaven-like, and the lower earthy. In the latter, characters jostle with each other across an endlessly changing tableau of dissimilarity—by historical and regional background, physical size and physiognomy, with personalities from princely icons to cagey tricksters, models of munificence to tightwads, modesty and propriety to the unchaste and uncouth. From Tuscany to London, North Africa to China, they range the globe, speak with hints of local dialects, and embody social strata from kings and popes to a baker and stable boy. The *brigata*, in contrast, are perfect nobles, uniform and virtually undifferentiated except as necessary to define what they represent in an abstract realm of ideas. Allegory, as much Boccaccio's vein as realism, persists in the narrators' cryptonyms, choreographed movements, monarchy, and the numbers that define them as perfect.

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<sup>132</sup> Battaglia Ricci's *Ragionare nel giardino* is essential reading for the comparison.